

AT THE CENSOR INTERFACE:  
THE THAI TELEVISION *LAKORN*, ITS SPECTATORS AND POLICING BODIES

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis investigates six cases of censorship of the television *lakorn*, Thailand's version of the soap opera, from 2005 to the present. The primetime *lakorn* is consistently being watched by a quarter to a third of the nation, making it the programming with the farthest reach. These cases of censorship contend with issues of queer visibility, feminine desires, gender roles, family values, political authority, and corruption. I explore the censorship of *lakorn* as operating at an interface because it does not adhere to the rhetoric of censorship as the strict state prohibition of certain images and discourses pre-coded in official policies. The Thai state is neither the initiator nor authoritative decision-maker in these acts of censoring. *Lakorn* censorship is instead a process in which the interface serves as a physical and virtual space of interaction, mediation and negotiation. This process is ongoing since it does not begin nor cease with an external decision from a state board of censors and conditional since it depends on a substantial public reaction.

My study does not disregard the role of the state; rather it problematizes the extent and nature of that role and its inconsistencies. While the state never initiates censorship, it is always involved and implicated in varying extents. *Lakorn* censorship does not confirm the existence of a monolithic Thai state with the exclusive right to control broadcasting, but rather a state in conversation with others. Thus, the censor interface serves as a discursive site where interest groups, state bodies, channel executives and concerned individuals encounter each another to discuss, debate, and deliberate a wide range of pertinent issues. My thesis is a study of contemporary Thai popular culture in motion. Due to its mainstream appeal and soap genre conventions, the *lakorn* is the medium capable of breaching the fantasy/reality and public/private divides. Censorship is

the lens through which to examine the dynamic relationship between the institution of law, lawmakers and citizens. Finally, *lakorn* spectators, both fanatics and critics, are the drivers of cultural change through their participation at the censor interface.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

After immigrating from Vietnam to the United States with her family at the age of five, Nguyet Tong grew up under the bright Southern California sun. She spent her adolescent years in the city of Westminster. She went on to attend the University of California Los Angeles, majoring in International Development Studies and minoring in Southeast Asian Studies. Her commitment to service and volunteer work throughout her undergraduate experience earned her the Student Activist Award from the UCLA International Institute upon graduation. She graduated summa cum laude and with college honors in June of 2011. After an uneventful year off, Nguyet began her graduate program in Asian Studies at Cornell University in the fall of 2012 as a Foreign Language and Area Studies fellow for the Thai language. During her time in Ithaca, she experienced walking through snowstorms, flying in a propeller airplane, and avoiding oncoming deer for the first time. Nguyet is sincerely grateful for the memorable two years spent at Cornell earning her master's degree.

For my family and friends

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## *Introduction*

### **Policing a Cherished Pastime: Intersections within Soap Censorship in Thailand**

#### **The Thai Soap**

The contemporary landscape of primetime television in Thailand is a vibrant realm of high commercialism. Since its birth in the 1950s, terrestrial television has grown into the most accessible media form in the country today. Its prominence indicates the growing influence of the small screen on Thai popular culture. There are three types of television programming distinguished according to content. The first category is non-fiction or journalist which includes news, documentaries, and live coverage of current events. The second group is characterized as light entertainment to refer to game and quiz shows, talk shows, reality TV, and variety shows. Finally, the third type is fiction or dramatic which encompasses programming that requires acting such as the drama special, series, the sit-com (situational comedy) and the daytime and evening soap opera.<sup>1</sup> Within this television mediascape, the primetime *lakorn* (ละครโทรทัศน์) as Thailand's soap opera, is the most watched form of programming. Accessible through three free-to-air channels - Channel 3, 5 and 7 - and on the cable channel, True Visions, as of 2011, the *lakorn* garners a combined domestic audience of around 17 to 20 million on a nightly basis. The 1994 remake of *Dao Pra Sook* (ดาวพระศุกร์ - Ch.7) is one of the most beloved and well-known television shows in Thai history. The 2008 *lakorn*, *Kom Faek* (คมแฝก - Ch. 7), was watched by a quarter of the nation. The immense popularity of *Raeng Ngao* (เรงเงา - Ch.3) temporarily cleared the streets of Bangkok in late 2012. The Thai soap opera therefore gains this heightened status as the most popular visual medium of entertainment.

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<sup>1</sup> ArjarnRT, "Toratat...mi raay kaan praphet arai bang? [Television...has what types of programming?]," *RT201's Blog*, September 13, 2009, accessed April 20, 2014 <<http://www.oknation.net/blog/rt201dpu/2009/09/13/entry-1>>.

The *lakorn* is situated in a borderline space. By the nature of its genre, it is a serialized narrative that blends melodrama and realism. Due to its commercialization, it is designed for a mainstream audience wherein its content should be as neutral and intelligible as possible. Unlike other mediums of visual spectacle, it is a cherished pastime enjoyed mostly in the comforts of home, yet it is discussed about in public locations and often as public knowledge. Its nightly, nationwide primetime broadcast gives it such high accessibility. The *lakorn* also gains this currency with its audiences as the most prominent medium of imaginary world-making against which to test their own understandings and conceptions. When controversial issues are depicted in *lakorn*, their making of a fictitious world is being compared to the circumstances and conditions of the real world by its viewers. Thus, owing to its commercialized form, mainstream appeal and melodramatic character, the *lakorn* is able to unsettle the divide between fantasy and reality and public and private.

As such, the *lakorn* can very well act as a distinct marker and maker of its viewers' shifting configurations of desires, anxieties, curiosities and complacencies. Acknowledging the ability of the *lakorn* to infiltrate the intimate lives of its spectators is to recognize it not merely as a private outlet of daily entertainment but also a public spokesperson. It works as a powerful visual vessel of Thai ethos and values. Censorship then emerges alongside the contentions and contestations surrounding the validity and appropriateness of on-screen representations. Soap censorship in Thailand is an elaborate and perplexing operation that comprises of an extended network of state regulatory bodies such as the Ministry of Culture and the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission claiming to follow a legible system of evaluating and censoring *lakorn* content deemed inappropriate, inaccurate or inciting. But these state agencies often act more as moderators than as the initiators of a call for censorship. In this thesis, I argue that the visual

space of *lakorn* serves as the battleground on which various interests groups – parents, religious organizations, trade unions, fans, and even the creators themselves - also vehemently fight over the right to control what can and cannot be seen, what should and should be known.

### **The Censor Interface**

In her study on film censorship in Britain, Annette Kuhn reminds us that many censorship studies often start out with existing assumptions about where censorship occurs and about its outcomes. These assumptions are grounded in the prohibition/institutions model wherein censorship is understood as an act of prohibition, excision or “cutting out” which renders the censored text as partial or distorted in its representation. This model also “constructs censorship as an activity guided by practices of exclusion, and locates those practices in organizations such as boards of film censors, or institutions whose activities impinge directly upon those of censorship bodies.”<sup>2</sup> In framing any kind of censorship as a prohibitive activity conducted with a self-contained and predefined set of institutions, the prohibition model takes censorship as a given and reifies it. This definition is a constricting one which allows for only one story to be told. Such studies of censorship merely retell “official” institutional histories in their reiteration and summation of organizational and governmental policies that impose restrictions on film. This model, Kuhn warns, conceptualizes censorship as an authoritative, one-time action levied onto a passive, inert object. It isolates censorship practices from their broader social and historical conditions of existence. More importantly, the assumption that censorship only prohibits or represses neglects the fact that censorship might be equally productive in its effects.<sup>3</sup>

It is a truism to say that television censorship is a mode of state control and prohibition in Thailand. After all, the regulation of televised images, like speech and expression, is usually

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<sup>2</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 8, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kuhn, 3-4.

codified in official legislation. But heeding Kuhn's warning, my study of censorship avoids relaying an institutional history of the policing bodies of *lakorn*. I explore formal legal codes and broadcasting regulations only to contextualize censorship within the social and political conditions that frame its emergence and enforcement. The conventional definition under the prohibition/institution model when applied to the Thai context mistakenly treats censorship as a unilateral application of a comprehensive set of policies already coded by a unitary agency in charge. But *lakorn* censorship is not always the overt imposition of state power. Cultural aphasia as "the willed inability within a culture to allow for the articulation of certain ideas" is pronounced in Thailand. Topics that are taboo such as the monarchy, prostitution, and the *Sangha* or that reflect poorly on the Thai nation are refuted or outright denied by state authorities. State encouragement of this "national will not to know" puts great pressure on people to conduct themselves accordingly.<sup>4</sup> The censorship of *lakorn* is not simply the maintenance of these "discursive voids" through the consistent barring of an exhaustive list of immoral, sexist, racist, or violent topics. Rather, censorship is a bargaining process in which the state is not always present but the idea of the state is always operating. I argue that the constant reminder of the state, manifested in the looming threat of its sanctions for misbehavior and saying "the unspeakable", also works to govern and discipline its citizens.

In this thesis, I trace the intersections of soap censorship through an examination of the interactions between the censors, the spectators and the medium itself. I discover that it does not translate merely as the imposition of state policy and rules. Censorship, in every case, is a mediated process wherein different groups of people meet literally and figuratively to negotiate conflicting sets of demands. Therefore, my thesis is an investigation into the impetuses, practices, rationales,

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Jackson, "The Thai Regime of Images," *Sojourn* 19.2 (2004): 192. He draws from the work of Bishop and Robinson (1998).

relations and powers involved in a continual interaction at a censor *interface*. An interface materializes when a point of connection ties together two independent concepts, systems, or bodies. The interface exists as a common space where contact and communication between conflicting or incompatible things are possible. The *lakorn* anchors the Thai censor interface to connect the state with the public. The censor interface serves as an intermediary and synchronizer of the differing opinions between these two sides over control over access to information and knowledge. The censor interface is tasked with the responsibility of harmonizing the concerns of the state over the *lakorn* and the demands of the people who watch it. It acts as the arbitrator of statecraft and spectatorship. It is supposed to settle matters in order for the two sides to coexist. Being at the Thai censor interface entails exploring the various junctures where its parts - the *lakorn*, its spectators, and policing bodies - intertwine. This exploration will produce a telling view of the capability of the *lakorn* to confront, address, and even alter societal norms and expectations.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis will detail the history, practice and controversy of *lakorn* censorship in Thailand. My interest and research on this topic comes from my personal experience as an avid watcher of *lakorn* starting from when I first started learning the Thai language seven years ago. I also draw heavily on three bodies of literature: soap studies, censorship studies and entertainment news articles to account for the three aspects included in my title: the *lakorn*, its spectatorship and policing bodies. My study examines instances in which the *lakorn* brings into the spotlight underlying tensions and frictions within Thai conventions about sex and gender roles and political expression. Although other controversial issues such as poverty, social hierarchy, the urban bias, prostitution, and ethnic minorities are often addressed on-screen, I did not directly or fully investigate them because they have yet to trigger a major case of censorship. Finally, I focus my



thesis on *lakorn* from 2005 to the present with one exception since the censor interface as a space of interaction and negotiation only emerged at a time when spectators have a variety of channels of protest to voice their call for or criticism of censorship.

Chapter 1 will explore the commercial success of the *lakorn* in primetime Thai television. It details the development of the genre in the country with comparisons to its counterparts in the U.S., Britain and Latin America. It discusses the core characteristics of the *lakorn* in terms of its formulaic configuration, high predictability and commercialization. Chapter 2 outlines the establishment of the main state agencies responsible for monitoring broadcasting in general. The government has long legitimized television censorship, erecting a formidable mountain of legal backing. State censorship demonstrates the unease felt by influential political figures about the power of television to shape public thinking. This chapter will also explain the mechanisms, phases and temporality of *lakorn* censorship in particular to distinguish it from the censorship of other types of programming and mediums. While this chapter emphasizes the state legislation and policies involved in the censorship process, it is intended to illustrate how law is utilized to reconfigure and reconstitute social, political and power relations between the state, television media producers and its consumers. The first half of this thesis aims to demonstrate how the supposed make-believe world of *lakorn* is also subjected to censorship because of its potential as the most watched medium to enflame public opinion, destroy the sense of morality, and smear the purity of Thai identity.

Chapter 3 focuses on recent cases of *lakorn* censorship in which sex and gender paradigms were being tested at the interface. The censorship of queer representations manifests not in their prohibition or omission, but in their prominent but neutralized incorporation into the *lakorn*. The censorship of feminine desires occurs when soaps were targeted for their salacious and gratuitous

display of the sexual behavior of female character(s) who clearly challenged Thai patriarchal conventions. The negotiation between different groups at the censor interface assessed prevailing conceptions of proper gender roles and propriety only to end up reaffirming them. Chapter 4 analyzes several incidents in which a *lakorn* was banned for its political connotations and tacit references. This chapter focuses on the most infamous case of censorship: the self-imposed ban of *Nuer Mek 2* by Channel 3 in early 2013. The politicized debate surrounding the mysterious content of the last few episodes and reason behind the abrupt termination shows how the political objectivity of *lakorn* and its spectatorship are no longer givens. The aftermath of this incident was quite productive in fueling gripes and disagreements, proving that debates about censorship are not entirely resolved with one decision. The second half of the thesis aims to show how law and the state frame but rarely determine the need for censorship. It also expands and complicates the notion of *lakorn* spectatorship. On one hand, it demonstrates how the petition for censorship by harsh critics of *lakorn* is also part and parcel of spectatorship. On the other, while viewers can request for censorship, they can just as easily protest against it. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a fascinating account of the shifting interplay between the *lakorn* as medium, the interpretative work of its fan(atic)s and the strategies of its policing bodies.

In this study, I argue that the television *lakorn* serves as the favored medium and mechanism through which to reevaluate social norms and their applicability to an ever-changing Thai society. Despite its primary role as a source of reaction and entertainment, the *lakorn* possesses a valuable productive potential. It serves as an outlet to address real issues such as the pillars of the Thai family, reexamine social realities such as the status of queer individuals, reflect on lived experiences such as the role of modern Thai women, and expose acute problems such as a corrupt government. Bitter struggles are staged at a censor interface where contestations between

producers, spectators and the state over the “correct” representation of sexuality, gender roles, religious authenticity, political expression, and cultural identity are being played out. It is the *lakorn*, in its breaching of the demarcation between fiction and reality and public and private, which brings this out in such a spectacular manner in every sense of the word. The story of the audience reception of the *lakorn* and the state and non-state efforts to regulate its content will be an engaging plotline in and of itself, one filled with conflicts, chaos and of course, plenty of drama.

## *Chapter 1*

### **Basking in the Limelight: The Success of the *Lakorn* in Primetime Television**

The soap opera today is distinguishable as one of television's oldest drama forms. Its great success at reaping audience loyalty around the world is irrefutable. Its genius at fashioning an imaginary world of melodramatic splendor is wholly entertaining. The soap opera originated in the United States in the 1930s when soap producers such as Colgate and Palmolive sponsored weekday serial narratives broadcasted first on radio. The soap opera was transferred to a televised form as television industries in the U.S., Britain and Brazil gained momentum. The contemporary soap is now a global genre in that it is a narrative mode produced in many countries and it is the most exported form of television viewed in a range of cultural contexts.<sup>5</sup> The soap has mass appeal and marketability with today's viewing audiences. From its American origins, the soap opera has skyrocketed into a worldwide guilty pleasure. The soap has even carved out its own place in the discipline of television studies. What makes it so special? What makes it so addictive? More importantly, what makes it so lethal?

The early years of the soap opera can attest to how far it has come. The first American soap operas during the Depression years were radio serials that overtly targeted married women since the episodes were interspersed with commercials for health, beauty and household products. The British soap opera came next when BBC radio aired its first in 1941. When this serial form was introduced to American television in the 1950s, the soap was marketed to TV audiences as a low-budget, daytime programming targeting female viewers who worked at home. The wild success of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) then commenced the reign of the primetime American supersoap. With

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Barker, "Global Soaps and Global News," *Global Television: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), 75.

its glitz, high production value, and long-running daily programming, newcomers such as *Knots Landing* (CBS, 1979-1993), *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989), and *Falcon Crest* (1981-1990) gained cult status as primetime TV soaps. British television followed with *Eastenders* (BBC1, 1985-) and *Neighbours* (BBC1, 1986-2008).<sup>6</sup> The soap opera has grown alongside the development of television in these two countries. By the 1990s, the soap opera was no longer taken lightly. It had transcended the realm of women's programming into a television heavyweight.

Since the birth of television in Thailand, the *lakorn* as the Thai version of the soap opera has also climbed its way up the broadcasting ladder for its mass appeal. Due to its high viewership accumulated over the decades, the *lakorn* is now the topic of daily conversations in living rooms, universities, and coffee shops across the country. The *lakorn*, at first glance, seems too silly and inconsequential to be a serious issue of investigation. To consider the *lakorn* solely as a commercial gimmick, however, is to disregard its role beyond the TV screen in shaping everyday lives. The *lakorn* compiles an amalgam of elements that tailor to Thai viewers and has more recently caught the interest of various audiences abroad. Despite its penchant for the sensational, the *lakorn* provides viewers with more than just a few laughs and tears. It is a powerhouse of contemporary Thai popular culture. Before understanding how the *lakorn* can provoke the censors, it is crucial to locate the foundations of its popularity. This chapter focuses on the rise of the *lakorn* in Thai primetime television by exploring its essence, both its parallels to and digressions from popular soap genres worldwide. It maps out the production, the narrative, the allure, and the afterlife of the Thai soap opera in order to illustrate how it has become such a prized commodity for fans and television executives.

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<sup>6</sup> Trisha Dunleavy, "Serial Melodrama: The Soap Opera," *Television Drama: Form, Agency, Innovation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 101-102.

## The Birth of Television

Thai television was born in 1950 under the Department of Propaganda. Along with radio broadcast inaugurated earlier in 1930, the army had a firm grip on the airwaves in these early days of broadcasting.<sup>7</sup> In 1955, Thailand became the first country in Asia to provide a regular television service. The first television station was set up on June 24, 1955 under the name of the Thai Television Company, a public enterprise under the Public Relations Department, to operate Channel 4. Three years later, the Ministry of National Defense opened the second station, Channel 5, as a public relations tool for the army.<sup>8</sup> In 1967, another Royal Army project launched the first color television station, Channel 7, under the name of the Bangkok Broadcasting and Television Company. The Thai Television Company followed in 1970 by broadcasting in color on Channel 9 alongside the black-white system on Channel 4. That same year, Channel 3 was established and operated by the Bangkok Entertainment Group. In 1977, the Thai Television Company was shut down in favor of establishing the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), a state enterprise under the Office of Prime Minister, to operate only Channel 9 from then on.<sup>9</sup> Within two decades, television quickly emerged as the new frontier of national development. The government, army, and private sector were vying with each other for the right to operate one or more channels in hopes of benefiting from its future capacity to reach the population at large.

The competition between these three parties may have fueled the rapid development of television in the country. The initial onset of television programming in the country did not pose much threat to the film industry since it was relatively expensive to produce and disseminate in

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<sup>7</sup> Pirongrong Ramasoota Rananand, "Reforms and Self-Regulation," in *Between the Tiger and the Crocodile: Broadcast Media Self-Regulation in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, Thailand: Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2004), 100.

<sup>8</sup> Paradee Kiatpinyochai, "The Thai Television Broadcasting Industry: Its Economics & Politics" (MA thesis, Thammasat University, 1990), 9, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Paradee, 16-17, 21-24.

the infancy years. Only several thousand television sets were imported mainly to urban, upper-class Thai households. By 1975, there were only about 685,000 households with television, mostly in the Central Region of the country. However, when national broadcast was made available in 1979, a substantial number of upcountry households gained access.<sup>10</sup> By 1986, with dropping costs, the number of households owning a TV set increased significantly. About 80% of urban families and 40% of rural families had one set.<sup>11</sup> The growing accessibility of television drastically changed the composition of mass media. Half of advertising expenditure for this decade went to television alone while the combined expenditure from radio, newspaper, magazine and cinema made up the other half.<sup>12</sup> Since all TV stations eventually became commercial, the main criterion for selecting programs was its potential for mass appeal. Variety shows and imported U.S. television series were popular with adults while the children enjoyed U.S. and Japanese cartoons as well as local programs specially made for them. Sport programs, particularly local and foreign soccer matches, international tennis tournaments and even U.S. football, basketball and boxing bouts also had wide appeal. But the Office of the Prime Minister noted that the most popular programs were the locally produced serial or *lakorn (toratat)*.<sup>13</sup> The 1980s was a phenomenal decade of growth for Thai television, paving the way for the soap to dominate primetime entertainment. In 1994, the National Statistics Office reported that 47 million people out of a population of 57 million have been watching television regularly since they were six years old.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sara Van Fleet, "Everyday Dramas; Television and Modern Thai Women" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1998), 205-206.

<sup>11</sup> Patsorn Sungsi, *Thai National Cinema: The Three Potent Signifiers of Thai Identity, Nation, Religion and Monarchy, their Interrelationship and Influence in Thai National Cinema* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), 115-116.

<sup>12</sup> Paradee, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Prime Minister Royal Thai Government, *Thailand in the 80s* (Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich Press Co. Ltd., 1979), 139-14.

<sup>14</sup> Van Fleet, 206.

For more on the development of television: "Prawat toratat nai prathet thai [The history of television in Thailand]," *RT201's Blog*, July 5, 2009, accessed February 20, 2014 <<http://oknation.net/blog/rt201dpu/2009/07/05/entry-2>>.

The composition of the industry today indicates that the main players in broadcasting are its regulators – the MCOT and PRD – the army, and the operators from the private sector. Currently, Thailand has six free-to-air terrestrial television stations that are directly or indirectly owned by state agencies: Channel 5 and 7 under the Royal Thai Army, Channel 3 and 9 under the MCOT, and Channel 11 under the National Broadcasting Service of Thailand and Thai TBS, owned by the government through the Public Relations Department. There is one subscription cable service under a satellite network, TrueVisions.<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Thai television industry operates under a dual system in which the state is the legal owner of all radio and television stations but allocates the daily control and management to commercial enterprises.<sup>16</sup> Then and now, being a main stakeholder in the television industry implies a position of great privilege and entitlement. It guarantees the upper-hand in the quest to conquer national airwaves. It secures a flowing influx of profits in the commercialization of televised broadcasting. Most importantly, it means the power to carve out a specific message that could be disseminated to the masses.

Station	Launch Year	Official Name	Operations License	Owner
Channel 3	1970	Bangkok Entertainment Group (TV3)	Concession	MCOT
Channel 5	1958	Royal Thai Army Television (RTA TV-5)	Ownership	Royal Thai Army
Channel 7	1967	Bangkok Broadcasting and Television Company (BBTV-7)	Concession	Royal Thai Army
Channel 9	1955	Modernine TV	Ownership	MCOT
Channel 11	1988	National Broadcasting Service of Thailand (NBT)	Ownership	Public Relations Department
Channel 29	2008	Thai Public Broadcasting Service (Thai PBS)	Ownership	Government and the Public
TrueVisions	1998	TrueVisions (cable satellite)	Ownership	True Corporation

Table 1.1: The current ownership and management of national television networks in Thailand

<sup>15</sup> Somkiat Onwimon, "TV's Elusive Dream," in *Between the Tiger and the Crocodile: Broadcast Media Self-Regulation in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, Thailand: Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2004), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, "The Development of a Participatory Democracy: Raison D'être for Media Reform in Thailand," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 22 (1994): 106.



## On Center Stage

In the first year of television broadcasting, dramatic productions consisted mainly of taped versions of stage theatre. Thailand's first production written specifically for television was a *lakorn* titled *Suriyanee Refuses to Marry* (สุริยานีไม่ยอมแต่งงาน). It was a live performance airing on Channel 4 on January 4, 1956 and was an instant success. There were five productions in this first year, 46 in the following year, and 100 in the year after that.<sup>17</sup> Stage play actors dominated *lakorn* live productions in this pioneer age of television. Soon, Channel 7 also began to produce its own *lakorn*. The *lakorn* progressed quickly from a stage performance where the actors are fed lines periodically to one in which they had to memorize and recite the lines themselves. Pre-recorded soaps made it onto the scene in 1976. In 1981, at the urging of the National Telecommunications Committee, soaps began airing in primetime slot after the evening news (around 8:30-10:30pm), which continues today.<sup>18</sup> Benefitting from the television boom, the 1990s witnessed the proliferation of *lakorn* production, signaling a golden age of television. AGB Nielsen started measuring ratings for Thai television industry in the greater Bangkok area in 1980. By 1997, TV ratings were measured and reported nationally.<sup>19</sup> The Thai *lakorn* had fully come into its own. Many of the most well-beloved soaps came out during this decade, most of which have been remade: *Koo Gum* (คู่กรรม - Ch.7, 1990), *Wanida* (วนิดา - Ch.3, 1991), *Si Pan Din* (สี่แผ่นดิน - Ch.3, 1992) *Tawipop* (ทวิภพ - Ch.7, 1994), and *Dao Pra Sook* (ดาวพระศุภ - Ch.7, 1994).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Van Fleet, 209-210.

<sup>18</sup> Pornchai Sereemongkonpol, "Lakorn love," *Bangkok Post*, June 21, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> "Thailand," *AGB Nielsen Media Research*, accessed February 15, 2014

<<http://www.agbnielsen.net/whereare/dynPage.asp?lang=english&id=243&country=Thailand>>.

AGB Nielsen Media Research measures domestic viewership with a rating system based on a number scale that corresponds to the percentage of the population who tuned in. Their system equates each rating interval with one percent of the national population as indicated from the most current census. A rating of 10 (10%) in 2010 will reflect a higher number of viewers than the same exact rating in 2000 since the population size has increased.

<sup>20</sup> "Lap luang phrang lakorn thai (jop): Sin 'Silapa' suuyuk 'Thorikit' [The secret deception and disguise of the Thai drama (end): The end of 'art' onto the era of 'business']." *AST Manager*, July 4, 2009, accessed January 25, 2014 <<http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9520000063043>>.

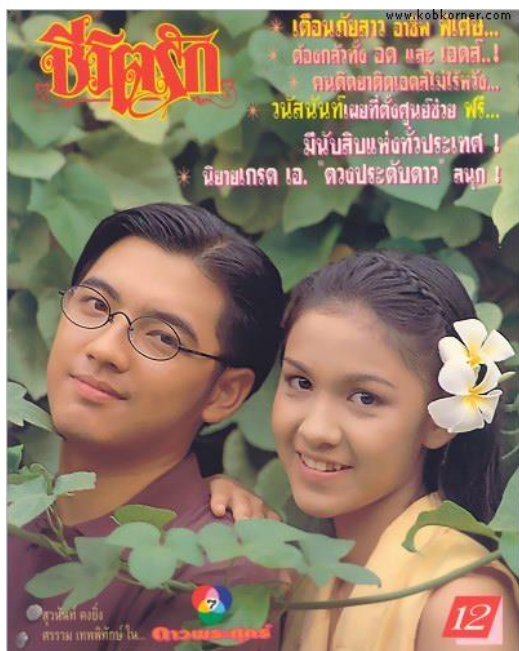


Illustration 1.1: One of Thailand's most popular *lakorn* of all time, *Dao Pra Sook*, starring Num Sornram Thippiteek (left) and Kob Suvanant Kongying (right)

The 2000s cemented the status of the *lakorn* as a rating machine. Similar to the telenovela industry, the Thai *lakorn* industry generates a star system that permeates into almost every other aspect of the entertainment industry.<sup>21</sup> *Lakorn* stars today gain fame and fortune through their work in multiple soaps which springboard their entry into music, film, magazine shoots, promotional appearances and advertisements. Four out of the five highest paid male Thai celebrity are *lakorn* actors. The top five on the female side are all *lakorn* actresses.<sup>22</sup> With the explosion of the internet, viewers were also tuning in online. Numerous fanclubs, websites, and forums were popping up all over cyberspace. In 2008, Channel 7's *Kom Faek* (คมแฝก) scored the highest viewership rating of all time with around 15 million viewers. In 2010, then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva attended

<sup>21</sup> Van Fleet, 221.

<sup>22</sup> "Aum-Nadech Dara Kha Tua Phaeng Kae Khrung Pii Ru Nia [Aum-Nadech, the appearance fees of celebrities are expensive. Is this just from half the year?]," *Sanook! Webboard*, July 12, 2012, accessed January 29, 2014 <<http://webboard.sanook.com/forum/?topic=3621390>>.

The fifth highest paid male Thai celebrity is Ananda Everingham, a well-known film actor, who is set to debut in his first *lakorn* role in 2015.

the 16<sup>th</sup> Asian Games in Guangzhou and together with Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jia Bao signed a Memorandum of Understanding to start televising popular Thai soaps on China Central Television (CCTV8) and local stations, which draw up to 700-800 million viewers.<sup>23</sup> The same year, Channel 3 celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a large-scale project that introduced the multi-series *lakorn*. Channel 3 aired a 4-part production, *4 Hua Jai Haeng Khun Khao* (4 หัวใจแห่งขุนเขา), back to back with each story standing on its own but related to its predecessor(s). Two years later, satellite channel TrueVisions produced its first primetime *lakorn* as part of its True Asian Series. The inaugural program was *Coffee Prince* (คอฟฟี่พริ้นซ์ ไทย), which was followed by *Endless Love* (รักนี้ชั่วนิรันดร์) a year later. Currently, viewers can watch *lakorn* every day of the week on Channel 3, 5, 7, and TrueVisions. With today's technology, audiences anywhere can consume up to 85 daytime and primetime *lakorn* airing within a year.

The production of the Thai *lakorn* runs on a commercial engine. It has eclipsed the film and music industry in terms of lucrativeness. Following the making, marketing and reception of the 2013 version of *Koo Gum* (คู่กรรม or Ill-Fated Lovers) helps to sketch out the modern life of the *lakorn*. Originally a historical romance novel by Thommayanti, the story has been interpreted three times in film and six times in television. This particular 2013 remake coincides with the release of a full-length mainstream film version.<sup>24</sup> The *lakorn* version, produced by Exact, aired on Channel 5 for a total of 24 episodes from January to April. Set during World War II, *Koo Gum* follows a young woman named Angsumalin, a proud Thai nationalist, who joins the resistance forces against Japanese occupation of Siam. She meets Kobori, a cheerful young captain in the

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<sup>23</sup> "Thailand: Thai soaps to serve Chinese audiences," *Asia News Monitor*, November 8, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Thommayanti (ทมยันตี) (real name: Wimon Chiamcharoen, วิมล เจียมเจริญ) is also known for another work, *Tawipop*, a historical romance fantasy novel. *Sunset at Chaophraya* (2013) starred Nadech Kugimiya as Kobori and Oranate D.Caballes as Angsumalin (Hideko). Although the film did poorly in theatres, recovering slightly more than half of its 80 million baht budget, Nadech recently won the TopPics award for best lead actor in a film for 2013.

Imperial Japanese Navy, but keeps him at a distance due to her involvement with the movement and her feelings for a childhood friend. Forced by political circumstances, she marries Kobori only in name and continues to secretly help free her country. *Koo Gum* is a tragic story of Angsumalin's struggle to accept Kobori's unconditional love without compromising her patriotism.<sup>25</sup>



Illustration 1.2: Promotional poster for the 2013 remake of *Koo Gum* featuring Bie Sukrit and Noona Nuengthida

Usually, the channels intermittently announce their upcoming projects, conducts a short internal casting call, and posts the cast list and a short synopsis on their website shortly before filming begins. In the case of *Koo Gum*, the media hype was a bit different. In mid-2011, rumors were circulating that there would soon be another remake of *Koo Gum* set for production in the coming year. Subscribers to Thai-language online forums such as Pantip started speculating who

<sup>25</sup> “Lakorn Koo Gum [Drama Fated Lovers],” *Channel 5*, accessed February 9, 2014  
<[http://www2.tv5.co.th/web56/show\\_program\\_m.php?id=91](http://www2.tv5.co.th/web56/show_program_m.php?id=91)>.

will be the *pra-ek* (พระเอก, hero) and *nang-ek* (นางเอก, heroine), referring to the male and female lead respectively. Names of up-and-coming actors were thrown out left and right. Debates over who was best suited for the roles of Angsumalin and Kobori erupted as fans were teeming with anticipation. Then in May of 2012, while at the press conference for their romantic pop musical collaboration *Ruk Jup Jai* (รัก จับใจ or Love Touch Heart), the two leads, Bie Sukrit Wisetkaew and Noona Nuengthida Sapon, confirmed that they will be reuniting for the *lakorn* remake of *Koo Gum*.<sup>26</sup> Their announcement marked the beginning of a year-long whirlwind promotional tour.

Within the next few months, preparations were made by the production company. Since this is a period *lakorn*, Exact was responsible for the design of wartime costumes and 1940s set pieces and scouting out filming locations. Bie and Noona donned their wardrobe for the first time at the fitting photoshoot for the promotional posters. On September 4, the pair and the entire supporting cast dressed in character at the oblation ceremony to inaugurate the start of filming. Entertainment reporters visited the set throughout the process to keep fans updated with periodic behind-the-scenes scoops on the progress of filming. About a week before the first broadcast, Channel 5 released short promos and published a booklet providing more details about the characters and storyline. One-hour episodes, interrupted by several advertisement breaks, began airing Mondays and Tuesdays at around 8:10pm. Soon after, Bie and Noona headed out to make brief appearances on several entertainment talk shows, celebrity news segments, and music programs. Official music videos from the original soundtrack with individual songs and a duet sung by the two main leads were uploaded online. In recent trends, a rating of 8 to 10 is considered

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<sup>26</sup> “‘Boy’ pat fun ‘Koo Gum’ wor ‘Bie-Kobori’ ‘Noona-Angsamulin’ long tua sut [Boy remakes ‘Koo Gum’ and brags that ‘Bie-Kobori’ and ‘Noona-Angsumalin’ are the perfect fits].” *ASTV Manager*, May 10, 2012, accessed February 9, 2013 <<http://www.manager.co.th/entertainment/viewnews.aspx?NewsID=9550000057545>>.

Most actors sign a contract to work exclusively under one channel or production company for the allotted time. Bie was the runner-up in season three of *The Star*, an annual national singing competition, in 2006. He has since acted mostly for Channel 5 which, as a sponsor of *The Star*, has privileges to recruit actors from the contestant pools of the show. Noona, on the other hand, has worked for multiple channels in the past.

a success. *Koo Gum* scored an average of 3.5 over the course of its run, a moderate success for Channel 5 which does not draw viewer ratings as high as its competitors, Channel 3 and 7. A few months after the *lakorn* finished airing, Exact released a DVD box set. In the future, Channel 5 could potentially sign a deal to sell the broadcast rights to China since Bie's very first *lakorn*, *Roy Apeed Hang Ruk* (รอยอดีตแห่งรัก, 2006) was CCTV8's second most-viewed drama of 2010.<sup>27</sup> It is apparent that the commercialization of the *lakorn* motivates the channels to market every production from conception to the end of broadcast and sometimes even after that.

### **Oh, the Drama!**

The genre of the soap opera is the most salient and resilient narrative form in television. It has taken on many different forms across the globe since its American inception. Early U.S. daytime soaps were long-running serials without expectations of closure or an ending. The sense of time in the narrative, rather than being subordinated to plot considerations, takes on the characteristics of real time, creating the impression that events in the soap world continue unabated between episodes. Moreover, its narrative structure relies on the intertwining of multiple plot stands within any given episode. As an open serial, the American daytime soap only ends when the soap itself is cancelled.<sup>28</sup> In the 1980s, when the serial form was in great demand, *telenovelas* put Latin America on the map. Literally meaning “a novel transmitted by television”, the telenovela symbolizes the conquest of Brazilian television for it has evolved into an international phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> Most telenovelas, mainly from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela, were financed directly by TV networks or independent producers and widely exported for audiences abroad in the late 1970s to 1980s. The telenovela is a melodramatic narrative mode inspired by

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<sup>27</sup> Parinyaporn Pajee, “Thai soap operas become popular in China,” *McClatchy – Tribune Business News*, Feb 19 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Barker, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Monica Rector and Aluizio Ramos Trinta, “The ‘Telenovela’” *Diogenes* 29 (Mar 1981): 194.

prior forms in theatre and serial literature. While resembling the American soap, the *telenovela* is, nevertheless, a distinctive Latin American popular art form.<sup>30</sup> They must have clear-cut stories with definite endings that permit narrative closure:

Every TN starts with an apparently organized situation, which, in a second moment, reveals the existence of critical and troublesome relations, to reach a solution for the conflicts at the end, or, at least, indicate it. Three stages can here be distinguished: organization—disorganization—reorganization. The third moment represents harmony between the elements, the absence of any problematic situation and the presence of positive values. This course is established according to the essential values of each society, according to its ethical-moral code.<sup>31</sup>

As a closed serial, the *telenovela* can take up to 200 episodes to complete its broadcast.<sup>32</sup> Both the American soap and the *telenovela* have been influential to the composition and commercialization of television worldwide.

Cinematic images are iconic in that they narrate stories, reflect collective or individual experiences and visualize certain dreamworlds and fantasies. Images of film also give a negative imprint or appearance of reality even while they fulfill the function of conveying information and signifying ideas.<sup>33</sup> Annette Hamilton however argues that Thai society is not reproduced through the images that flow from cinema and television wherein representations of the real become stand-ins for actual experience. Thailand's dramaturgical principles are instead rooted in "varying structures of recognizable narrative and performance, some of which are based on much older forms."<sup>34</sup> In other words, Hamilton contends that Thai cinema and television are not always

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<sup>30</sup> Ana M. Lopez, "Our welcomed guests: Telenovelas in Latin America," in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 258.

<sup>31</sup> Rector and Ramos Trinta, 200.

<sup>32</sup> Robert C. Allen, "Introduction," in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 18-23.

<sup>33</sup> May Adadol, "Introduction," in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, ed. May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Annette Hamilton, "Cinema and Nation: Dilemmas of Representation in Thailand," in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 143.

explicit depictions of the real and lived. Rather, such images are heavily saturated with symbolic meaning to be interpreted and deciphered through traditional stories and concepts.<sup>35</sup>

The *lakorn*, however, occupies a liminal space between representation and reality. This straddling of fiction and reality is derived from its subscription to the genre of the soap opera as a televised narrative loosely based on but exaggerated from real life. Television soaps are populated with “real” people in familiar landscapes. Viewers bring with them some idea of reality and test the on-screen fiction for “plausibility” in the world in which they live. Soap operas problematize the idea of fiction and fact and fantasy and reality as dualities or separate and opposed entities.<sup>36</sup> The world of the *lakorn* may be one of fictional melodrama. Yet its spectators attend to it as if it speaks of and to the real world. In contrast to Hamilton’s view, the *lakorn*, while relying on familiar tropes and traditional symbolism and despite its many plot embellishments, is still seen by viewers as a stand-in for the world around them.

Soap operas are premised on the balancing and blending of realism and melodrama. Realism refers to a set of conventions by which the drama stands as a representation of the real world with motivated characters, recognizable locations, and plausible social problems. Narrative techniques are used to deliberately obscure their own construct and present the story as real. Melodrama, in contrast, is grounded in the heightened sense of the dramatic with characters who lack sufficient motivation to fight through life’s torments. Characters act as icons for a particular emotional stance or dilemma sustained by the narrative and scenes. Elevated acting style, dramatic music, lingering close-up shots, and plot twists all work to stretch the credibility of the realist narrative.<sup>37</sup> The

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<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, 144-145.

<sup>36</sup> Louise Spence, “‘They killed off Marlana, but she’s on another show now’: Fantasy, reality, and pleasure in watching daytime soap operas,” in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183.

<sup>37</sup> Barker, 78-79.



world's first primetime soap, *Coronation Street* was introduced to British television in December of 1960. Its successful fusion of the generic community construct, humor and the working-class milieu pioneered the social realist strain within British drama.<sup>38</sup> Coined as light entertainment, American primetime supersoaps, on the other hand, thrived more on “aesthetics of escape” that indulged in the lavish and extravagant at the expense of characterization. *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, for example, utilized consumption-oriented techniques such as high production value, glamorous wardrobes, affluent sets, good-looking and pampered characters, and overtly melodramatic plots. Such soaps are defined by their sentimental, artificially plotted drama reinforced by strong emotionalism, moral polarization, and inflated expressions.<sup>39</sup> As either an outlet of escape or frivolous entertainment, soaps explores popular themes by blurring the line between fiction and reality. It is, to varying extents, an expanded imaginary of the real.

Thai soaps have a stylistic flair to them as well – an exceedingly melodramatic one. Melodrama does not wish to represent the way events would unfold in the real world, but rather condenses, enhances, or expands moments of struggle, adventure, fear and disruption in order to over-represent them.<sup>40</sup> Like an American supersoap, the Thai *lakorn* over the years has reveled more and more in the spectacle of opulence and exaggeration. The difference is rooted in how the *lakorn* melds facets and features of the Thai cultural repertoire into its storyline and characters. The *nang chiwit* (หนังชีวิต, film of life), a popular dramatic Thai film genre, combines elements of the soap opera and Hollywood dramas in the 1940s. The significance of this genre is its interpretations were situated within frameworks of modern Thai life to endow narratives and characters with cultural specificity which strongly resonated with Thai audiences. Early *nang*

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<sup>38</sup> Dunleavy, 108-109.

<sup>39</sup> Dunleavy, 118-119.

<sup>40</sup> Annette Hamilton, “Family dramas: Film and modernity in Thailand,” *Screen* 33.3 (1992): 260.

*chiwit* usually followed a female protagonist embedded in a convoluted familial and romantic scenario from which she extricates herself in due course and gets her happily ever after but only through an arduous personal sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> The *lakorn* is a serial *nang chiwat* on the small screen. On parallel with old melodramatic Thai films, several themes are given prerequisites for the plot: marital problems, female suffering, social marginality, and familial obligations. These problems both materialize and must be remedied through Thai notions of merit, karmic consequences, and family responsibility. The plot emerges from the family situation of the major characters wherein everyone must deal with the emotions and confusions behind a major crisis or series of crises:

[The protagonists is] wrongly displaced from their proper social and financial heritage. This central character is forced into actions through no original fault of their own, but as a result of parental or familial misdeeds, of bad *karma* or events in past lives which are only now working themselves out...However, no matter how difficult or painful the circumstances may be, it is expected that there will be some kind of forgiveness and resolution among the characters at the end, even if great sacrifices are called for. The person who has been wrongly excluded from their family's heritage will be reincorporated usually through marriage.<sup>42</sup>

This basic configuration for the Thai *lakorn* has earned the undying loyalty of writers, directors, and viewers for decades. As a closed serial like the telenovela, the *lakorn* completes its narrative arc within 12 to 25 episodes and airs for three to five months.<sup>43</sup> The *lakorn* arrives at the third moment of reorganization where all conflicts are fully resolved in accordance to a religious-cultural-moral canon. Along the way, though, it delves into the world of fantastic excess whose absurdity is exactly what constitutes its brilliance and charm.

Susan Sontag defines camp as a sensibility structured on the "love for the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." Camp is a mode of aestheticism that sees the world not in terms of

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<sup>41</sup> Hamilton (1992), 259.

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton (1992), 267.

<sup>43</sup> Each channel airs three primetime soaps within a week on Monday-Tuesday, Wednesday-Thursday, and Friday-Sunday. Channel 5 and 7 air hour-long episodes. A *lakorn* usually ends within 20 episodes unless it is a special or large-scale production. Channel 3 airs two-hour-long episodes so their *lakorn* are shorter in terms of the number of episodes (usually 12-14) but comparable in terms of duration of total airtime.

beauty but rather in terms of degree of artifice and stylization. The trademark of Camp is its affection for extravagance. It is the theatricalization of experience that proposes itself seriously but should not be taken that way. Camp is the art of too much. “The ultimate Camp statement: it’s good *because* it’s awful.”<sup>44</sup> *Lakorn* followers live for the emotional thrill ride powered by preposterous plotlines. They smile, chuckle, cringe, shout, grasp, and cry along with the characters almost instantaneously. The ridiculousness of it all is which gives the *lakorn* such mass appeal.

There is a specific Thai term to describe a campish tendency: *nam nao* (น้ำเน่า, literally rotten water). Originally a political term, the notion of *nam nao* has permeated into mass media and popular culture. *Nam nao* is a marker of predictability and exaggeration or *wer* (เวอร์, over-the-top/overdone) in plot devices, dialogue and acting techniques. The predictability of a *lakorn nam nao* is built on recurring themes and repetition of stories familiar to Thai audiences. Its exaggerated characteristic is established through larger-than-life characters, implausible scenarios, and a heightened sense of emotion or suspense. Yet the notion of *nam nao* adds another dimension to the critique of *lakorn*. *Nam nao* refers to narratives that reaffirm the traditional schematization of the Thai moral worldview and values system.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the term not only bemoans the perpetuation of histrionic thematics and acting but also the stagnant condition of certain forms of Thai creative artistry and dramatic performances. Whereas camp is an aesthetic of too much, *nam nao* is an aesthetic of the same. It embraces the repetition of melodramatic clichés. It is the art of reprise that ironically does too little.

Harsh criticism has targeted the rigidity of the imagined world of the Thai soap opera. Critics within and outside of the industry have lamented the one-dimensional quality of most Thai soaps. The majority of *lakorn* display the lifestyles of high-class society in all its splendor and

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964.

<sup>45</sup> Van Fleet, 229-235.

affluence. Scenes in the capitol depict the dense city traffic, the airport, high-rise office buildings, shopping malls, international hotels, and private units in large modern hospitals. When the male protagonist leaves his luxurious mansion in the city, he vacations in famous holiday locations such as Pattaya, Chiangmai, or Phuket. Family, friendship, and martial drama are embroiled in scandals of prostitution, rape, madness, suicide, abortion, infidelity involving mistresses (or minor wife, เมียน้อย), inheritance, scheming and even murder.<sup>46</sup> Remakes after remakes preserve this formula in order to draw in high viewership and advertisement sponsors. The *lakorn* resides in a realm where values such as good and evil are clearly and conveniently positioned as polar opposites to allow audiences to predict the storyline until the end. Lost in the process is meaningful content with profound messages and an open-endedness that allows viewers to make their own assessments.<sup>47</sup> The *lakorn* world is an idealized construct in which social hierarchy is a given. In the eyes of its critics, it is an elaborate façade built to valorize upper class society, wealth, and materialism. It misleadingly presents Thailand as a place where issues of economic inequality, gender discrimination, ethnic conflict, and rising urbanization are secondary to the pursuit of romantic love, individual achievement and familial unity.

The Thai soap has the stigma for being the pinnacle of outlandish narrative construction and formulaic blandness. There seems to be this permanent cast of unnecessary characters: the noisy servant, the ladyboy best friend, the horrible mother-in-law, the inept villain, and more. Yet viewers often make deep connections between the storyline and their own lives for they see the *lakorn* as reflective of the real world. Soap watching has matured into a national pastime wherein gossip about each episode and the actors themselves are part of everyday conversations in a variety

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<sup>46</sup> Hamilton (1992), 265-266.

<sup>47</sup> “NBTC jat thot ‘Lakorn thai nay fan’ kruy thang ‘wichachip’ kam kap kan aeng [The NBTC organized a discussion on the ‘Thai drama of one’s dreams’ and pave the way for professionals to write on the topic themselves],” *Prachatai*, August 10, 2012, accessed on January 24, 2014 <<http://prachatai.com/journal/2012/08/41983>>.

of settings. The *lakorn* is seen as this “cultural staple” for its steadfast place in contemporary Thai popular culture.<sup>48</sup> Despite the criticism, the *lakorn* has risen to the top as an entertainment source, socialization tool, advertisement magnet, tabloid architect and export commodity.

### **World of Fandom**

Sustained and loyal viewership from devoted fans has made television soaps the most successful broadcast programming in many countries. Serials have dominated daytime television schedules in the U.S. since the 1950s. Over half of American women between the ages of 18 and 35 with TV sets at home follow at least one soap opera, incurring enormous profitability for US network broadcasters. A Chinese soap, *Yearnings*, in 1991 at the time became the biggest hit on television in Chinese history. From 1987 to 1988, the seventy-two part weekly serial of *Ramayan*, a Hindu religious epic, regularly drew in an audience of 80 to 100 million people in India.<sup>49</sup> By 1995, telenovelas from TV Global in Brazil had captured high ratings in all programming blocks, most notably 74% share during primetime hours and were being exported to 130 countries.<sup>50</sup> “Soap mania” has infiltrated all corners of the globe.

Such zealous spectatorship has created a thrilling world of fandom beyond the television screen. The term “fan”, short for “fanatic”, was first used in the sense of an audience member in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to refer to a keen and habitual spectator of a professional sport. This term by the 1920s would encompass other elements of commodified mass culture (i.e. film). While Dorothy Hobson’s *Crossroads: the Drama of a Soap Opera* (1982) and Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas* (1985) dealt with the reception of television soaps, their studies discussed “active audiences” or

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<sup>48</sup> Pornchai Sereemongkonpol, “Lakorn love,” *Bangkok Post*, January 21, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, 2 -3.

<sup>50</sup> Marilyn J. Matelski, *Soap Operas Worldwide: Cultural and Serial Realities* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999), 10-12, 79-80.

“enthusiastic viewers” rather than television fans.<sup>51</sup> It was not until Henry Jenkins’ canonical *Textual Poachers* (1992) that the most critical dimension was introduced to the term “fan.” The fans described by Jenkins were actively engaged with the “text” of television in many ways to produce material culture of their own and exhibit agency in their everyday media consumption.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, *lakorn* fandom refers both to an enthusiastic community of regular soap viewers and their creative engagements with the medium.

After broadcast, Thai soaps take on a life of their own or more accurately, its spectators give them new lives. Shans living in Burma dub Thai soaps into their own language for local consumption. In Shan “production houses” or family rooms, those with sufficient knowledge of the Thai language record Thai soaps from satellite signals every night starting from 8:30pm. The dubbing team then gives the *lakorn* a complete makeover: changing the Thai names into Shan, inserting Shan pop songs as opening and closing credits, and dubbing the voices in Shan. The final videotape or VCD is sent to every town in Shan state where resident rental shops make multiple copies for distribution.<sup>53</sup> With the help of technology, international fans today can follow a *lakorn* live from their computers or visit a handful of steaming sites whenever they can spare an hour or two. Multinational teams are formed on popular subbing sites to translate, subtitle, edit, and upload *lakorn* for fans worldwide to watch in a dozen other languages, mainly English and Chinese.<sup>54</sup> Transnational spectatorship is only one layer of the vast world of soap fandom.

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<sup>51</sup> Alan McKee, “Fandom,” in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 67. Origins and definition of the word “fan” taken from Oxford English Dictionary (1991).

<sup>52</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: television fans & participatory culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2-3. For more on fandom, see Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Amporn Jirattikorn, “‘Pirated’ Transnational Broadcasting: The Consumption of Thai Soap Operas among Shan Communities in Burma,” *Sojourn* 23.1 (Apr 2008): 30, 40-41.

<sup>54</sup> Steaming sites: watchlakorn.in, dootv.com, drama.bugaboo.tv; Subbing sites: viki.com, youtube.com.

Domestic *lakorn* fandom is thriving as well. At least a quarter of the population turn on their TV sets at 8:30pm every night to catch the *lakorn*.<sup>55</sup> Dedicated fans do not stop at following each episode with their favorite actors. They frequent forums to have lengthy discussions about everything from the fashion worn by actors, the furniture in the sets to their forecast about future episodes. Established in 1997, Pantip has become the most visited Thai-language portal website for Thai fans to share news, participate in discussions, and connect with one another. Created in late 2010, Asianfuse (<http://asianfuse.net/discuzz/forum/5-thai/>) is the largest English-language forum for international fans to discuss *lakorn* and Thai entertainment in general. Many viewers form fanclubs of varying sizes to maintain active sites and social media pages relying information for the fan community to follow the star's every move. Some create celebrity gossip blogs to post updates and commentaries about entertainment news. Others screencap each episode to give a scene-by-scene translation and summary for fans who do not understand Thai.<sup>56</sup> *Lakorn* fandom is very much a collaborative spectatorship, aiming to build an active virtual community whose members share an enthusiasm for the Thai soap.

But fandom is not always seen in a positive light. In their study of American soap fandom, C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby points out that media fans have a reputation for lacking the ability or willingness to tell the difference between fiction and reality. The stigma around the lunatic fan in the U.S. during the 1970s coincided with a growing market for news and gossip about entertainment celebrities. Since then, the media has reduced the perceived social distance

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<sup>55</sup> Although there have been recent shifts, Channel 7 has for years dominated the ratings, drawing in about half of the total nightly viewership. Channel 3 comes in second and Channel 5 trails way behind. The demographics of viewers show that the majority of people watching *lakorn* are women. The geographical distribution of viewers indicates that the rural population make up a higher proportion of the total number of viewers and they tend to watch Channel 7 because Channel 7 produces *lakorn* set in rural locations and about rural lifestyles more often than the other two free channels. While urban viewers prefer Channel 3, they make up a smaller proportion of the overall viewing audience and therefore, do not raise the ratings for Channel 3 enough to compete with Channel 7.

<sup>56</sup> For a comprehensive list of English-language fan sites: <http://lovefia.wordpress.com/spreading-the-lakorn-love/>.

between ordinary people and the famous by creating and maintaining an illusion of intimacy.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the high public profile of Thai soap actors and an impression of intimacy felt by their fans are affects abetted by the tabloids and entertainment media. Thai entertainment news is dominated by gossip about soap celebrities or literally stars (ดารา). It is not uncommon for hundreds of fans to show up to promotional events, press conferences, and talk shows to support their beloved stars. While fans' obsession with the minute details of the private lives of their favorite soap stars can be perceived as unhealthy and irrational, it could also be framed as a creative process of identity and public knowledge formation. The atmosphere of fan idolization creates a sense in which the interpenetration of *lakorn*-world and real-world open up this collective fantasy space in which the private lives of soap stars became a new kind of public consciousness and knowledge.<sup>58</sup> Whether *lakorn* fandom is delusional fanaticism or harmless enthusiasm, the Thai *lakorn* has nevertheless spawned an ardent culture of spectatorship which embraces and perpetuates the bleeding over of fiction into reality and of on-screen into off-screen.

### **Conclusion: *Lakorn* Fever**

One of Thailand's most well-known story is *Sawan Biang* (สวรรค์เบี่ยง, Heaven Diversion). Based on a 1970 novel by Krisna Asokesin, it has been made into a *lakorn* five times (1971, 1976, 1988, 1998, and 2008). The synopsis of the 2008 remake demonstrates many key characteristics of the Thai soap:

*Leela is not wholeheartedly in love with her fiancé. During her university years, Leela was obsessed with Kawee (our male protagonist) only to have him react to her confession with utter arrogance. After having unrequited love for Kawee who accused her of chasing after rich men,*

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<sup>57</sup> C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, "Introduction," *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 1-3.

<sup>58</sup> Hamilton (1992), 263.



*Leela is determined to marry a man that loves her. Luck with have it though that only five days before her wedding, Leela and her fiancé get into a car accident which takes his life but spares hers. Kit, having caused the accident that also took the life of his second wife, pays for Leela's hospital bills and takes care of her until his pity turns into love. He asks for her hand in marriage. Even though she does not love him back, Leela accepts after overhearing slandering words from Kawee who happens to be Kit's only son. Upon learning their relation, Leela is set on revenge.*

*Kit allows Leela to invite her family to stay at his mansion together. She brings her younger sister, Narin (our female protagonist), her younger brother and mother to stay. Kawee is furious since he disapproves of the marriage from the beginning. Kawee soon finds out that his new stepmother is in fact Leela. He repeatedly argues with his father over this. One day, Kit goes into cardiac arrest and dies because of the stress stemming from the conflict with his son. Kawee feels regretful for being the reason for the death of his father. After the funeral, Kit's will is read and his fortune is divided evenly between Leela and Kawee. But Kit secretly includes a provision which states that while they can live in separate quarters, the house can never be sold off. Leela agrees to this clause due to her love-hate feelings for Kawee. She hopes that Kawee would be forever reminded of his part in Kit's death. Kawee continues to hate Leela for stealing his father's love and lavishly spending the inheritance that rightfully belonged to his mother.*

*Again and again, Kawee takes out his anger at Leela on Narin instead since they live in the same house. But he could not comprehend why his hatred made him want to see Narin's face and argue with her. The more Kawee scrutinizes her, the more of her beauty he sees. Kawee falls in love with Narin without knowing. He grows possessive when her friend Tom starts pursuing her romantically. Kawee and Narin fight on many occasions. Even though Narin is mad at him, Kawee does not give in because he is someone who likes to win. When Leela and her family are away*

from home, Narin returns home at a late hour. Enraged with jealousy because Narin is growing closer to Tom, Kawee rapes her that night. Narin is unable to continue facing her sister and moves out of the mansion only to discover that she is pregnant with Kawee. Kawee goes in search of her and realizes that she was carrying his baby. After contemplating his past misdeeds, Kawee follows Narin closely and caters to her every wish as he tries to become a better person. In the end, Narin accepts his sincerity and love after seeing Kawee atone for his mistakes. Narin returns to live in the mansion while Leela leaves to reflect upon her vengeful behavior in the past. Finally, everyone is back where they should be and living happily together in their home.<sup>59</sup>



Illustration 1.3: DVD cover of *Sawan Biang*, starring Anne Thongprasom as Narin and Ken Theeradeth Wonpuapan as Kawee

Thai audiences have encountered these plot devices numerous time: family disputes over inheritance, revenge due to unrequited love, sibling jealousy, and the struggle for redemption. But “the conventions of soap opera storytelling are so strong that we can hardly say that we are watching to see *what* will happen. Rather, we watch anticipating what we know will happen once

<sup>59</sup> Translated with a few additions and clarifications from two short synopses originally released by Channel 3: “Sawan Biang [Heaven Diversion],” *GossipStar*, accessed February 10, 2014 <<http://gossipstar.mthai.com/tv-content/17036>>; “Ruang yaw lakorn Sawan Biang [Synopsis of drama Heaven Diversion].” *MThai*, accessed February 10, 2014 <<http://talk.mthai.com/topic/15792>>.

again and to see *how* it will happen this time.”<sup>60</sup> The nation was captivated by this most recent remake of *Sawan Biang* airing from March to May 2008. The ratings averaged 14.6, peaking at 21.7 (13.88 million viewers). Did I tune in? You bet I did.

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<sup>60</sup> Spence, 193.

## *Chapter 2*

### **Repairing the Glitches: Grounds of Censorship in Times of Chaos and Change**

As the previous chapter highlights, the television industry in Thailand has experienced remarkable growth in terms of its influence, reach, and profits since the 1950s. Today, free-to-air television remains a major source of national and world news, entertainment, education, and filtered information about the royal family. Daily programming ranges from Thai-dubbed foreign films, talk shows, children cartoons, cooking programs, games shows to nationwide singing and talent competitions. The *lakorn* still retains its title as the programming with the highest commercial value, warranting its airing at the most coveted timeslot after the evening news. Like other soap operas around the world, the *lakorn* is perhaps a formulaic and overly dramatic rendition of run-of-the-mill stories. Yet in terms of viewership and advertisement revenues, it has managed to capture more of the nation than any other medium. Consequently, the *lakorn* receives added attention from both its spectators and policing bodies.

What exactly is censorship? A “censor” originally refers to a Roman official tasked with counting the population and regulating its morals. The root of this term connotes the tallying of citizens and the notion of monitoring their expressions. Censorship in the contemporary sense is narrowly defined as state suppression of information and expression through state surrogates in panels, bodies and governmental agencies. The rhetoric of censorship invoked in the West often condemns such state repression as a violation of the universal right to free expression and a curtailment of civil liberties.<sup>61</sup> Debates on censorship seemed to inevitably implicate the state. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, for example, nearly always refers to censorship as

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<sup>61</sup> Janelle Reinnelt, “The Limits of Censorship,” *Theatre Research International* 32.1 (2006): 1-2.

*government* action to limit expression. Censorship in the American legal system refers almost exclusively to the government's restriction, limitation, or filtering of information or ideas in speech, mass media such as newspapers and television, electronic media and the Internet usually prior to publication or broadcasting. Historically, under repressive forms of state, draconian censorship is often preceded by a desire to control the public. The Federal Communications Commission serves as the licensing body for broadcasting to ensure "the public interest, convenience or necessity."<sup>62</sup> Censorship in the U.S. is a state channel of control over the access to ideas, opinions, and viewpoints. Its justification speaks to the need to protect public interest.

While censorship certainly went hand-in-hand with the development of the Thai television industry, it was never a single act by a sole party within a historical and social vacuum. With its widespread reach, the *lakorn* contributed further to this growing sense of unease among the country's policymakers about the ability of television to indoctrinate certain messages in its audiences. The analysis of *lakorn* censorship therefore is situated within the framework of general television censorship. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the evolving character of television censorship by speaking to and against the prohibition/institution model. It traces the legal threads of censorship since the state has frequently deployed the institution of law to corroborate its policing efforts. But the story of television censorship in the country for the last 65 years is not simply a story of repressive state power. It is a history of contestation between the state and various actors over issues such as national security, Thai identity and legislative reform.

### **Coding the Censors**

There are four overlapping terrains of television law: laws protecting intellectual property such as patents and copyrights, the regulation of broadcast frequencies and technological standards

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<sup>62</sup> Charles H. Sterling, "Censorship," *Encyclopedia of Journalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Reference, 2009), 269-272.

by national bodies, direct and indirect regulation of television content by the government, and “private censorship” or self-regulation (in-house agreements that influence television content).<sup>63</sup> This chapter speaks in varying extents to the latter three terrains. The focus on law is not to say that television is constrained by and constituted in a set of legal relationships. It is to say that television is made in concert with the elaborate social relations within government regulation of the consumer economy. Television – its production, regulation, consumption and censorship – are embedded in relations that involve law and a polity making and enforcing law.<sup>64</sup> Outlining television law is to trace changing relations between state censors and the public.

The 1955 Radio and Television Broadcasting Act built the legal foundation for the regulation of television. It required the licensing of all broadcasting by government officials in order for broadcasters to have access to adequate technical and financial resources. In truth, it was more to ensure that programming would reflect the nation’s core values.<sup>65</sup> Since the codification of this law, the television industry has gone through significant developments, necessitating considerable changes in broadcasting legislation. The civilian government in 1974 created the National Broadcasting Executive Board (NBEB) under the National Broadcasting Authority to license and monitor transmission and programming. In 1977, the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT) was authorized to administer broadcasting regulations. MCOT was primarily put in charge of television policy development while the Public Relations Department (PRD) oversee on program content, mainly in radio.<sup>66</sup> It is apparent that several state agencies and enterprises simultaneously implemented the law. State supervision of broadcasting

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Streeter, “Television and the Law,” in *Television Studies*, ed, Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 42.

<sup>64</sup> Streeter, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Glen Lewis, “Television, media reform and civil society in ‘Amazing Thailand’” in *Television, Regulation and Civil Society in Asia*, ed. Philip Kitley (New York: Routledge, 2001), 63.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, 64.

was defined by overlapping responsibilities and multiple levels of authority. Industry leaders had to be cognizant of the range of regulations and protocols in place.

The official legal code specifically for censorship was introduced in the Proclamations of the 1957 Revolutionary Group (item 6 of Proclamation 17) which bans all forms of publication with “false matter of a nature tending to panic, worry or frighten the people or matter tending to incite, or arouse disorder, or conflict with public order or morality, or prophecies concerning the fate of the nation which might upset people...” The methods of executing this policy, however, often fell out of the grounds of law. Formal rules provide just an excuse for dubious enforcement tactics such as unannounced police visits, warnings from unknown officials, or anonymous letters and phone calls.<sup>67</sup> Television censorship gained a new level of legality and coordination under the direction of the Broadcasting Directing Board in 1975, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister and others recruited from the ranks of police and military.<sup>68</sup> In 1976, the government passed Decrees No. 15 and 17 which imposed strict conditions on program content to all radio and TV stations. As a result, between 1977 and 1994, all television news programs were screened at 8pm on a daily basis.<sup>69</sup> Television censorship was the responsibility of a panel of four people selected by the Broadcast Directing Board. The censors had jurisdiction over all programs, making daily rounds to all the stations to check the programs before airtime. They were meticulous in this line of work, watching every scene and listening to every line. The explicit goal was to guarantee that televised images, sounds, and language could not threaten national peace and unity.<sup>70</sup> Evidently, the

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<sup>67</sup> Annette Hamilton, “Video Crackdown, or The Sacrificial Pirate: Censorship and Cultural Consequences in Thailand,” *Public Culture* 5.3 (1993): 516.

<sup>68</sup> Annette Hamilton, “Cinema and Nation: Dilemmas of Representation in Thailand,” in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 157.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Hamilton (1993), 518.

government has played a mediating hand in television broadcasting. Interactions between the state and mass media has long been characterized by threats, pressure, and coercion.

The 1980s not only ushered in boom period for the television industry, but for print media as well. Under the elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan, the media gradually began to assert an independent, critical spirit. This time period saw rising political demands from an affluent new class being articulated on television and in press, allowing for increased freedom of mass media.<sup>71</sup> The Chatichai government had brought an end to the military's post-1976 strategy of guided democracy in an effort to shift the foundations of power away from bureaucracy and the military to the Cabinet and business. However, the exposure of government corruption and suspicious ties to the business sector by the press during this time considerably weakened support from the urban middle class. On February 23, 1991, a group of generals staged a coup by holding Prime Minister Chatichai at gunpoint.<sup>72</sup> What followed would go down in Thai history as the epitome of the state of chaos that arises from stringent state suppression of opposition voices. More media freedom had only worked to further amplify the state's preoccupation over bad press and in turn, its efforts at concealment. This time, it was the military that acted as big brother.

### **Media Warfare**

Black May, as it came to be called, was a brutal affair that brought major problems underlying Thai political censorship to light. Justifying their actions as an anti-corruption crusade, the Class Five generals of the coup group later formed the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) to forcefully dismiss parliament. When news emerged on the military's intentions of drafting a new constitution, pro-democracy groups joined forces under the Campaign for Popular Democracy

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<sup>71</sup> Hamilton (1993), 516.

<sup>72</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Politics, 1970s onward," *A History of Thailand*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 244-246.



(CPD) in protest of the junta's growing despotism.<sup>73</sup> The Suchinda government started intensifying television censorship in early May while permitting only material that was supportive or uncritical of the administration to air. On May 7, the government cut off all satellite feeds used by foreign television organizations to curtail the damaging news traffic from abroad.<sup>74</sup> State endeavors to run interference simply escalated the gravity of the situation as more grew intolerant of the irresponsibility and irresponsiveness of the government.

On May 17, 1992, over 200,000 protesters participated in a mass demonstration at Sanam Luang in Bangkok to oppose the Suchinda government. Over the next 3 days, the NPKC junta enacted a violent plan that was designed for a communist insurrection wherein fully armed soldiers shot into the crowd and beat up demonstrators. The military backlash to the protest movement was branded as a valid force of resistance against what Suchinda claimed was a premeditated attack on the system of government and constitutional monarchy.<sup>75</sup> Mainstream broadcast media did not dare to show the protests around the Democracy Monument, Thammasat University and parliamentary headquarters leading up to Black May, but instead offered the usual lineup including extensive coverage of 1992 Miss Universe pageant taking place in Thailand.<sup>76</sup> Television channels failed to report the death of at least 50 civilians under the hands of the troops on top of depicting protestors as disruptive troublemakers. Coverage of the military violence by CNN and BBC stepped up to filled in the void left by state-controlled television with the press pushing forward

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<sup>73</sup> Pasuk and Baker, 247.

<sup>74</sup> Duncan McCargo, "The buds of May," *Index on Censorship* 22.3 (April 1993): 4.

Print media fared much better than television. The NPKC was fully aware of the cementing influence of the press and its political aims. Immediately following the coup, the NPKC attempted unsuccessfully to impose systematic newspaper censorship that required all editors to run their articles through the censors before publication. When the CPD became more vocal in the second half of 1991, the press also grew more candid about the shortcomings of military rule. After March 1992 elections, General Suchinda Kraprayoon accepted the premiership despite his previous public statements denying such an aspiration. The press corps, united under an active professional organization, the Reporters Association of Thailand, remained just as outspoken in their continued criticism of the government.

<sup>75</sup> Pasuk and Baker, 248.

<sup>76</sup> Hamilton (1993), 517.

with full reports in face of military warnings. The widespread uproar over the violence prompted the unprecedented intervention by King Bhumiphol to put an end to the conflict. Television viewers saw the now infamous scene in which Suchinda and pro-democracy leader Chamlong Srimuang crawled on the floor towards the King who reprimanded them and obligated them to embrace conciliation. The King later appointed Anand Panyarachun as interim prime minister in June 1992.<sup>77</sup>

The events of May 1992 did not just destroy years of relative national peace and marked a transition in which clashes between the state and mass media became more overt and hostile. The 1990s signaled a new era of censorship prompted by this irreconcilable antagonism between the two sides. Duncan McCargo believes that the May protestors did not merely oppose the premiership of Suchinda Kraprayoon; they were refusing to be subsumed under a political order in which the military and bureaucracy exerted immense influence. The vicious war between entrenched state power and collective popular will in a rapidly-changing urban society was waged on a media battlefield. Awarded to the victor was the supreme control of information.<sup>78</sup> Thus, in the aftermath of all the pandemonium lies the challenge of reconfiguring the web of relations between the state, the media and the public. At the forefront of this task is the question of the role of mass media and its accountability to society. The peril facing media in Thailand was its vulnerability to shifting from watchdog to lapdog of the state. Television censorship during Black May was a pivotal for assessing and accelerating the need for media reform.

### **Push for Reform**

After the bloody military crackdown, the censorship of television continued to be a state-heavy project. The interim Anand government replaced the NBEB with the National Broadcasting

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<sup>77</sup> McCargo, 6-8.

<sup>78</sup> McCargo, 3.

Commission (NBC) with a charter to censor program content and override both the MCOT and PRD. It was allowed to impose conditions about the establishment and removal of stations and to prescribe rules for program supervision and advertisements. The 1994 Regulation on Broadcasting No. 14 passed by the first Chuan government expanded the grounds of censorship to include offences against public order or moral standards. Station directors had to be of Thai nationality, programs must be in Thai with few exceptions, and hosts and announcers must hold a certificate issued by the PRD. Since the military, juridical powers, local officials, the National Culture Commission, and the Office of the Prime Minister were all involved in some capacity, broadcasting administrators were simultaneously circumventing and catering to the different interests of various departments.<sup>79</sup> Television censorship, by this time, had turned into an intricate business driven by political, economic, and nationalistic interests.

The atmosphere of enthusiasm surrounding the new liberal 1997 Constitution however was conducive for extensive media reform. Article 40 of the new Constitution called for the establishment of an independent National Broadcasting Commission to supervise all television and radio stations.<sup>80</sup> There was much optimism behind Article 40 insofar as it would for once install an independent agency to be the industry regulator. While the PRD and the Army wanted just one regulator, the reformers (the Council of Mass Communication Faculty Members of Thailand, several NGOs and civil liberties groups, and the Monitoring Group on Article 40) wanted two separate committees to ensure sufficient attention was being paid to concerns of public interest. After some discussion, there were plans to set up both the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC), each headed by seven

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<sup>79</sup> Lewis, 64-65.

<sup>80</sup> Somkiat Onwimon, "TV's Elusive Dream," in *Between the Tiger and the Crocodile: Broadcast Media Self-Regulation in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, Thailand: Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2004), 52.

commissioners. The NBC would draft a master plan for broadcasting related to education, religion, arts and culture, national security, and agriculture.<sup>81</sup> Commissioners will be selected by the Senate from a list of nominees from academia, government agencies, professional associations and civic and nongovernmental groups to serve six-year appointments.<sup>82</sup> But as the appointment process went underway, the campaign for media reform developed into more of a wrestling match than a collaborative agreement. The push for reform was being incessantly stalled as the government, the private operators and the reformers were hashing it out over the division of power within the two committees. Despite fervent disagreements, vote-blocking and aggressive lobbying from all sides, the functions of the NBC were never finalized.<sup>83</sup> The broadcasting sector was still missing an independent regulatory body. In times of chaos, censorship was a means to silence dissent. Even in times of much-needed change, little was being done.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Thai television industry was put at a standstill in terms of policy development. The need for the deregulation and democratization of state censorship laws was placed on the backburner for a while as Thailand transitioned to the leadership of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. However, the relative calm was just the eye of a brewing storm of chaos that was about to assault Thailand in the most alarming way. With the controversy behind the 2006 coup d'état of Thaksin's second administration, his criminal trial, court-ordered eviction, and the now infamous Red vs. Yellow Shirts protests, the advancement of a free mass media amidst this backdrop of turmoil was up in the air.

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<sup>81</sup> Lewis, 68-69.

<sup>82</sup> Pirongrong Ramasoota Rananand, "Reforms and Self-Regulation," in *Between the Tiger and the Crocodile: Broadcast Media Self-Regulation in Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, Thailand: Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2004), 103-104.

<sup>83</sup> Pirongrong, 105.

## Troubleshooting

Thaksin Shinawatra, a business tycoon, won a landslide election in 2001 and reelection in 2005. His populist-leaning policies threatened the political equilibrium set by the royal palace, the military, and to an extent, Privy Council under an aging Prem Tinsulanonda. He was toppled by a military coup supported by the palace and Privy Council in September 19, 2006. Thailand was thrown into complete disarray after the coup. Thaksin was not simply a controversial politician; he symbolized a challenge to the monarchy. Deeply invested in this kind of symbolism, the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts under the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) resumed demonstrations in May 25, 2008 to object to the People Power Party (PPP) government under Samak Sundaravej. The PAD viewed this coalition that came into power in the 2007 elections as a form of Thaksin proxy rule.<sup>84</sup> In December 2008, the Constitution Court dissolved the pro-Thaksin PPP. After some shuffling of party allegiance and alliance-making, the Democrat Party claimed the majority in a coalition government that voted in Abhisit Vejjajiva as Prime Minister.<sup>85</sup> With unresolved tensions, the new premiership did not signal an end to this tumultuous period in Thai politics.

The Radio and Broadcasting Business Act of 2008 was born out of this volatile post-coup climate. It returned Thailand to the strict culture of television censorship reminiscent of past times of great political instability. The Act specified in Section 37:

Any broadcast content which seeks to overthrow constitutional monarchy, destroy national security and morality, or harm the mental and physical health of the population must be barred from airing.<sup>86</sup>

Because the language of the new law was comparable to that of its predecessors, this legislation did not elicit much interest at the time. Then a February 2010 Supreme Court verdict seized \$1.4

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<sup>84</sup> Duncan McCargo, "Thai Politics as Reality TV," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68.1 (Feb 2009): 11-12

<sup>85</sup> "Democrat claimed majority to form government," *The Nation*, December 7, 2008.

<sup>86</sup> Radio and Broadcasting Business Act B.E. 2551 (2008), Section 37.

billion of Thaksin's personal fortune after finding him guilty of abuse of power and malfeasance. Thaksin was sent on the run.<sup>87</sup> With his exile, Thailand seemed on the brink of total catastrophe.

The court ruling set off the last phase of a fatal confrontation between the Abhisit government and pro-Thaksin Red Shirts protesters under the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). Mounting resentments and gripe between the two erupted in April 2010 when the military's handling of civilian protest exacerbated into a deadly militarized brawl. On April 7, when protestors stormed Parliament, the government declared state of emergency, effectively handing power over to the military to restore order by terminating the Red Shirts movement at whatever costs. On May 19, the last of many government operations forcefully ended the protests, claiming 50 civilian lives over the month-long offensive.<sup>88</sup> The frenzy of the Bangkok protests and the frantic media storm around it culminated in this moment. International and domestic media coverage of the military crackdown had again captured Thailand "coming apart at the seams."<sup>89</sup>

While in the shadows of the recent bloodshed of April-May 2010, the passage of a new legislation attempted to take the first steps in putting the pieces back together. In December, the NRA Organization Act of 2010 finally managed to set up the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (กสทช./NBTC) thereby replacing the NBC and NTC as a single convergent regulator for the broadcasting and telecoms sectors. The NBTC was to be headed by 11 commissioners (1 Chairman and 5 from each respective sector) appointed in 2011. The NBTC was responsible for issuing a master plan as the five-year guideline for broadcasting business and

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Chambers, "Thailand on the Brink: Insurgent Military and Eroded Democracy," *Asian Survey* 50.5 (2010): 841-843.

<sup>88</sup> Michael K. Connors, "Thailand's Emergency State: Struggles and Transformation," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2011*, ed. Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011): 290-294.

<sup>89</sup> Chambers, 854.

spectrum policy.<sup>90</sup> The NBTC has recently published its second annual report for the year 2012 and remains the chief body in charge of television censorship today.

<b>Regulatory body</b>	<b>Legal status</b>	<b>Administration and management</b>	<b>Regulation and supervision</b>
National Broadcasting Commission (1992-1998); new NBC created in August 1998 but never finalized	Political regulatory agency	Issues, renews and cancels licenses for television operators; provide technical assistance	Determines broadcasting guidelines for program content and advertising; censors and directs program content; removal of stations
Mass Communication Organization of Thailand (MCOT)	State enterprise	Licensee for Channel 9 and 3; provide television policy advice	Implements NBC (NBTC) program regulations
Public Relations Department (PRD)	State agency	Licensee for Channel 11	Issues speech certificates for all broadcasting hosts
National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), 2010 - present	Convergent regulatory agency	Issues, renews and cancels licenses for television and telecommunications operators	Replaces NBC as main regulator for broadcast and telecom regulation

Table 2.1: Powers and functions of regulatory bodies of the broadcast sector in Thailand<sup>91</sup>

### Serial Temporality

Thai cinema has struggled under state censorship as well. The Film Act of 1930 was the main legislation for censorship that went largely unchanged for decades. The Cinema Act of 1971 reserved the right to ban films deemed insulting to royalty, portrayed notorious criminals or discredited the government.<sup>92</sup> Since *lèse majesté* law makes it a crime to “defame, insult, threaten

<sup>90</sup> Pasu Srihirun, “Telecommunications in Thailand,” *Telecommunication Economics Research and Information Center, Office of National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission*, PowerPoint, June 2011, February 20, 2013 <<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/asp/CMS/Events/2011/ITU-ADB/FinalWorkshop/Thailand-S2.pdf>>.

<sup>91</sup> Glen Lewis (2001).

<sup>92</sup> Annette Hamilton, “Rumours, Foul Calumnies and the Safety of the State: Mass Media and National Identity in Thailand,” in *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, ed. Craig Reynolds (Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 289-290.

or in any way violate the revered position of the King” and the royal family, the censorship board requires that any depiction of the monarchy, even in the most reverent manner, to be approved prior to its exhibition or screening.<sup>93</sup> The board also objects to depictions of Buddhist monks in any manner other than absolute reverence, prostitution, and sexual promiscuity.<sup>94</sup>

When director Apichatpong Weerasethakul submitted his 2007 film *Syndromes and a Century* to the board before its domestic release, the board’s decision would spark a notorious battle between filmmakers and erratic state censorship. The Ministry of Culture forced him to cut four scenes: a young monk strumming the guitar, two monks playing with a toy UFO in a public park, a middle-aged female doctor drinking a bottle of liquor with some colleagues, and a doctor kissing his girlfriend.<sup>95</sup> The director went on to galvanize the independent film community and launched the Free Thai Cinema Movement to change the existing Film Act. His 8-month-long protest resulted in the promulgation of the Film and Video Act which went into effect in August of 2009 with a new classification system.<sup>96</sup>

All films are now screened and given a rating by the censorship board prior its theatrical release in Thailand. The ratings are advisory to allow movie-goers to decide for themselves whether or not to abide by the board’s suggestion. The new law also authorizes the state to prohibit

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<sup>93</sup> For more on the *lèse majesté* law, see David Streckfuss, “The Intricacies of Lese-Majesty: A Comparative Study of Imperial Germany and Modern Thailand,” in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, ed. Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010).

<sup>94</sup> John Fotiadis and Jonathan Englander, “Film and Television Censorship Laws in Thailand,” *Atherton*, accessed March 20, 2014 <<http://athertonlegal.com/publications/2-publications/40-thailand-film-censorship-laws.html>>.

<sup>95</sup> Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Sat pralaat*,” in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, ed. May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 160.

When he appealed the decision, the Ministry wanted him to cut two additional scenes. Apichatpong rebelled by replacing the cut sequences with strips of black film to highlight rather than hide this act of state censorship. Audience members were handed postcards with screencaps of these scenes and youtube links. The uncut version of the movie was only screened in Thailand once.

<sup>96</sup> Apichatpong stated that the Cinema and Video Act was “not a step forward” - “The folly and future of Thai cinema under military dictatorship,” *Thai Film Foundation*, August 11, 2007, accessed April 1, 2014 <[http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail\\_en.asp?id=106](http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail_en.asp?id=106)>.



the release of movies that “undermine or disrupt social order and moral decency, or that might impact national security or the pride of the nation.”<sup>97</sup> The film censorship board also retained its right to ban a film entirely under the new system.<sup>98</sup> When a provocative Thai adaptation of *Macbeth* (*Shakespeare Must Die*, 2012), a melodrama about a transvestite’s dysfunctional family (*Insects in the Backyard*, 2010), and documentary-style film exploring the persecution of Thai Muslims (*This Area is Under Quarantined*, 2009) were submitted, the film censorship board banned all three.<sup>99</sup> Censorship authorities tend to formulate their justification for censoring a film in terms of its transgression of national identity and security. May Adadol Ingawanij believes that these articulations “rests on a conception of cinema’s power that acknowledges and emphasizes the mimetic potency and mobile visibility of film.” Film is able to stimulate imitative behavior among the young and the masses. Secondly, film is able to enter an international stage and therefore must adhere to certain parameters of sanctioned national representation.<sup>100</sup>

While the censorship of *lakorn* is also justified along those lines, it is distinguished by the very same qualities that differentiated it from other forms of television programming and visual

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<sup>97</sup> Kong Rithdee, “Thailand passes controversial film act,” *Variety*, December 20, 2007, accessed March 20, 2014 <<http://variety.com/2007/film/news/thailand-passes-controversial-film-act-1117978081/>>.

The ratings system is divided into seven categories (taken from *Wise Kwai’s Film Journal*):

General Audiences — No sex, abusive language or violence

Promote — Films that should be promoted on the basis of cultural or artistic merit

13 — No violence, brutality, inhumanity, bad language or indecent gestures

15 — Some violence, brutality, inhumanity, bad language or indecent gestures will be allowed

18 — No exposed genitalia, crime or drugs

20 — Sex scenes are allowed but no exposed genitalia

Ban — Films that offend the monarchy, threaten national security, hamper national unity, insult faiths, disrespect honorable figures, challenge morals or contain explicit sex scene

<sup>98</sup> Chalida Uabumringjit, “The Age of Thai Independence: Looking Back on the First Decade of the Short Film,” in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, ed. May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 58.

Apichatpong stated that the Cinema and Video Act was “not a step forward” - “The folly and future of Thai cinema under military dictatorship,” *Thai Film Foundation*, August 11, 2007, accessed April 1, 2014

<[http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail\\_en.asp?id=106](http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail_en.asp?id=106)>.

<sup>99</sup> Matthew Hunt, “Thai Movie Censorship,” *Encounter Thailand* 1.7 (October 2012): 38-39.

<sup>100</sup> May Adadol Ingawanij, “Introduction: Dialectics of Independence,” in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, ed. May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 7-8.

mediums – its commercial, mainstream, and soap opera appeal. For decades, the soap opera was the most successful broadcast advertising vehicle in the United States.<sup>101</sup> Since the 1980s, the *lakorn* too is the most lucrative form of television broadcast in Thailand. Its main purpose is to reap in profit as evident by the dozens of advertisements and corporate sponsors that partially fund *lakorn* productions to sell products and services. The *lakorn* is intended for a specific audience only in the sense that it targets as high of a viewership as possible. Thailand only produces about a dozen mainstream movies annually. Even fewer documentaries and independent films are released for general viewing. In contrast, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the three main channels produced a combined total of approximately 70 primetime *lakorn* in a year's time for free-to-air television. Finally, *lakorn* spectatorship, often in the privacy of the home, is structured by the serial pace of the soap genre. The serial is a form of narrative organized around institutionally-imposed gaps in the text. The enforced and regular suspensions of narrative progression produce a different mode of spectator engagement compared to the film.<sup>102</sup> The serial timing of *lakorn* is also significant to the temporality of its censorship.

The sheer number of *lakorn* alone makes it difficult for the state censors to screen all content. Rather than a rating or at worst, a ban given by a certified board, *lakorn* censorship is a semi-intelligible process that involves its creators (self-censorship), internal and external censors. A form of self-regulation occurs in U.S. commercial television networks, for example, where program practices departments are employed to systematically and thoroughly censor scripts for mainstream audiences and advertisers.<sup>103</sup> Due to its commercialization, the *lakorn* is also censored

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<sup>101</sup> Robert C. Allen, "Introduction," *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7.

<sup>102</sup> Allen, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Streeter, "Television and the Law," in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 42-43.

first by its scriptwriters, directors and producers from the beginning to be void of taboo or polemic subject matters in order to cater to mainstream tastes. The second level of censorship falls under the jurisdiction of the channels. The censorship committee for each channel uses simple corrective measures to edit their *lakorn* prior to broadcast such as blurring out images of cigarettes, alcohol, weapons (mainly knives and guns), and partial nudity, cutting the sound when there is offensive or abrasive language, and adding a disclaimer for an illegal activity (i.e. gambling). The manner and extent in which to edit these types of scenes is up to the discretion of the network censor. Evidently, the grounds of censorship for *lakorn* are ambiguous and somewhat arbitrary.



Illustration 2.1: Post-production censorship practices include blurring out images (left - *Game Rai Game Ruk*; เกมร้ายเกมรัก - Ch.3, 2011) or running a disclaimer about illegal activities (right - *Khun Chai Ronnapree*; คุณชายรณพีร์ - Ch.3, 2013)

A television content rating system has been in place since 2006 with slight changes made in September of 2013 by the NBTC. The first three levels - Level 1 (ป 3+) for children ages 3-5, Level 2 (ค 6+) for children from ages 6 to 12, Level 3 (ต) for general audiences – mostly concerns daytime programming. A Level 4 rating (น 13+) is given to programs with material unsuitable for viewers under 13 years old or calls for parental guidance for children under the age minimum. Broadcasters can only air such programs between 8:30pm and 5am. Level 5 (น 18+) covers programs that contain coarse language, sexual situations or moderate violence. Lastly, Level 6 (ฉ)

covers adult programming that contain crude or indecent language and explicit sexual activity or violence. While these ratings must appear at the start of all TV shows, the *channel* is given the right to rate its own programs.<sup>104</sup> The intention behind this system is to roughly draw the boundaries of appropriateness. These criteria, however, do not stipulate the specifics and the extent of what is considered suitable material for each rating. Since the NBTC relies on the channels to self-censor, there is no external state system reviewing *lakorn* content in its entirety *before* airplay.



Illustration 2.2: The content rating for *Thong Neua Gao* (ทองเนื้อเก้า - CH.3, 2013) is verbally announced before the opening theme song and displayed intermittently throughout the episode at the bottom left-hand corner.

### **Conclusion: Insurance Policy**

The Thai state has historically capitalized on electronic media as its ideological mechanism. It can be used as personal political tool as with the government under Field Marshal Phibun and/or an instrument to build political consensus as with Field Marshal Sarit and his successors in the 1960s. The media war of Black May demonstrated how television was exploited by the state to save face and save it from persecution. The Suchinda government openly asserted that it did not have a policy curbing freedom of the press while continually accusing the press for

<sup>104</sup> Watchiranont Thongtep, "Broadcast regulator to introduce TV ratings system, *The Nation*, September 3, 2013.

instigating public unrest, threatening national security and creating confusion among members of the public.<sup>105</sup> These instances shows how televised images have long been central to the Thai state's management of cultural, political and social expression. State censorship was said to be in the name of preserving national unity, state legitimacy, and political stability. It becomes a vital state resource to dictate how to best represent itself and its version of what it means to be Thai.

The notion of Thai identity has been propagated by governments throughout history to strengthen Thai nationalism. By the 1930s, the Thai state was vigorously trying to codify and promote a national culture. One Cultural Mandates after another promulgated Thai-ness: changing country's name from Siam to Thailand, encourage the use of the word *Thais* for the whole population, and creating the flag, national and royal anthems as national symbols.<sup>106</sup> The National Cultural Maintenance Act, a royal decree in 1940, defined culture to be "qualities which indicated and promoted social prosperity, orderliness, national unity and development and the morality of the people." Then in 1977, the Office of the Prime Minister gave life to this concept with a monthly magazine, *Thai Identity* (เอกลักษณ์ไทย), to articulate that strong national Thai culture was vital to the country's independence and sovereignty.<sup>107</sup> Thai identity and culture have been put on this pedestal for being fundamental in preserving the strength and integrity of the nation. The state was acutely involved in every step to crystallize the nexus of identity, culture and nationhood. The extent of government commitment and patronage to this project underscores the necessity of the notion of Thai cultural identity to state ideology.

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<sup>105</sup> Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, The Development of a Participatory Democracy: Raison D'être for Media Reform in Thailand," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 22 (1994): 102-103.

<sup>106</sup> Craig Reynolds, "Introduction" in *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today*, ed. Craig Reynolds (Chiangmai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 4-6.

<sup>107</sup> Reynolds, 12.

What does this mean for television censorship? In June 2012, Kong Rithdee, an esteemed film critic for the *Bangkok Post*, penned a critical commentary about modern television in Thailand after the public outcry over a female contestant on a reality TV show, *Thailand's Got Talent*, who bared her breasts in a performance of expressionist painting. Television, he says, is now the root of distress, infamy and national hysteria over the need to preserve Thai values. Puritans, especially in the Ministry of Culture, “beat the drum of censorship” with “hypocrisy and cheap moralism” to save the image of the country. Censorship authorities confine the debate to simply matters of indecency. That is, televised breasts are obscene but televised coups are not. He pushes for the cultivation of media literacy in which viewers develop “immunity against the manipulation of media corporates” and their “greedy masquerade and mercenary ploys.” State censorship stands in opposition to media literacy because it robs us of our right to close our own eyes.<sup>108</sup> His words make apparent that this culture of state censorship of television has been in the making for years. State censors were unmistakably intended for policing Thai national identity under the pretense of cultural preservation and the maintenance of public well-being. Censorship was a vehicle to expunge the sounds and images of alterity and vulgarity. It is the privilege of blindfolding public eyes, quarantining damaging information, and monopolizing the terrains of knowledge.

The role of the state in the censorship of the *lakorn* in particular offers even a more convoluted picture. Once on air, the *lakorn* has passed two levels of censorship: self-censorship and internal censorship. The NBTC was given authority to operate as the final and only external censor with and within a policy that gave it powers over vaguely defined areas. In recent years, there have been cases where channels have had to submit to forced edits of highly suggestive scenes while a *lakorn* was already in broadcast rotation (Chapter 3). In early 2013, the ban of a

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<sup>108</sup> Kong Rithdee, “If the TV went a breast too far, then turn it off,” *Bangkok Post*, June 12, 2012.

*lakorn* before its complete broadcast sparked a major dispute, reprising questions about free media and political machinations (Chapter 4). The involvement of the NBTC in all these cases only made the incoherence of state censorship policies even more salient. *Lakorn* censorship is an undertaking lined with contradictions, ironies, inadequacies, and conundrums. The operation of the Thai censor interface, it turns out, is every bit as enigmatic and unpredictable as its constituents.

### *Chapter 3*

#### **Scandalizing Sexuality: The Scrutiny of Thai Gender Roles and Feminine Desires**

*Songkram Nangfah* (สงครามนางฟ้า - Ch.5, 2008) was a major TV scandal much to the dismay of Thai flight attendants, the Ministry of Culture, and its producers. The 2008 soap ignited a media firestorm that smeared the names of most involved. Only two weeks into its airtime, *Songkram Nangfah* made headlines not for its brazen exposé of a fictional Thai airline but for its sexualized rendering of the flight crews. In an official complaint to the Ministry of Culture, the trade union representing Thai aircrews demanded that the station immediately pull the “ugly soap opera” off the air. Union official Noppadol Thaungthong branded the *lakorn* as being “all about sex and air hostesses beating each other up in the cabin because of love and jealousy.” The outburst of protest urged its producers Exact to appease the union with a promise of longer skirts and no more catfights scenes between flight attendants while they are on duty or in uniform. The director apologized for all the trouble claiming that it was unintentional and the *lakorn* was made for the sole purpose of entertainment.<sup>109</sup> This entire fiasco, from the statement made by the union official to the concessions made by the production company, shows the gendered nature of *lakorn* censorship. It was not necessarily the adultery and debauchery of the male characters that triggered this huge outcry of criticism. Rather, it was the appalling and disgraceful behavior of its female air stewardesses who have come to represent a certain trademark and standard of Thai femininity.

The images and representations of Thai women have generated much inquiry into their possible reproduction of a discriminatory gender culture. Traditional perceptions of Thai women as valiant and courageous, yet fragrant and lovely; intelligent, yet willingly subservient and

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<sup>109</sup> “Bubble burst for Thai soap opera,” *BBC News*, January 22, 2008.



submissive can be found in early depictions in literature. A passage in the *Traiphumikkatha*, a masterpiece of Thai Buddhist literature composed in the early Sukhothai period (1239-1377), paints the ideal Thai woman: “Regally mounted upon her own war elephant, the proud queen rides forward into battle besides her king.” Her existence is indispensable but secondary to that of a man. In past decades, Thai women have achieved high levels of success in the business, academia and government. Despite these significant social and professional gains, modern Thai women still must contend with the ideal role of the dutiful daughter, virtuous and faithful wife, and selfless and devoted mother.<sup>110</sup> The ideal Thai woman is imagined in the domestic sphere as a guardian of the family and marriage. This idealized subjectification of the Thai woman into this beautiful creature whose wholesomeness and docility are overshadowed only by her familial piety and marital fidelity poses a problem for both real and fictional women who do not strictly fit this mold.

The presence and (re)presentation of Thai women and effeminate transgendered men in the *lakorn* have been the root of several TV scandals. In this chapter, I examine several cases in which the problematic displays of (ef)femininity and feminine desires on television have been subjected to restriction by state and non-state actors. In my account of the process of censorship in each case, I will give a quick synopsis of the *lakorn* in question, explain the impetus for censorship, detail the rationale given by the group or organization involved and trace the course of resolution that occurs at the censor interface. This chapter illustrates how censorship is another domain of gender politics. I argue that Thai gender and sexual norms have governed the course of action at the interface. But the appearance of characters outside of Thai heteronormative paradigms in *lakorn* is not prohibited. The issue at hand is whether or not their sex/gender deviance undermine such paradigms. In these cases, queer characters and sexualized female characters are critically assessed

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<sup>110</sup> Susan Kepner, “Introduction,” *Lioness in Bloom: modern Thai fiction about women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1-2.

at the censor interface against a benchmark of conventionality. The call for censorship is made to “correct” their extreme transgression of conventions on sexual conduct and gender roles. The end result is an affirmation of existing norms wherein these characters are “recast” to fit a proper (enough) role in the Thai gender culture. My investigation reveals censorship to be an effective strategy of appropriation and normalization not to deny sex/gender diversity within the country *per se* but to understate the extent of its alterity.

### **Queer Exploit**

At the heart of the issue over state prohibition of visual representations is what Peter Jackson has aptly coined “the Thai regime of images.” This regime of images is an apparatus of differentiated power exerted systematically to control actions and discourses within the public sphere. When actions or statements do not conform to an idealized form, they are perceived and constructed to be “disruptive.” These unwanted disruptions then necessitate an array of immediate actions to expel them from the public domain. This powerful mechanism of monitoring dictates what can and cannot be presented as public knowledge in Thailand.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, this regime fuels an essentialism of surface appearances wherein the real is hidden and unchallenged while what is on the surface is easily grasped and taken as real.<sup>112</sup> The Thai regime of images functions as a protective barrier against any visuals, behaviors, and expressions hazardous to the archetype of the Thai public image. According to Jackson, it is an aggressive guardian of a public face that must remain untarnished.

Televised images have a high degree of availability since the majority of the population has access to electricity, a television set, and is literate. Jackson argues that the divide between public and private is perpetually upheld by this regime of positive images that filters out that which

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Jackson, “The Thai Regime of Images,” *Sojourn* 19.2 (2004): 181.

<sup>112</sup> Penny Van Esterik, “Crafting Thailand,” *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford, UK and New York: Berg, 2000), 4.

can result in a loss of face. Consequently, the normative and morally proper are permitted to occupy privileged public spaces. On the contrary, the abnormal, immoral and unseemly are relegated to the private domain. A transgression of this entrenched divide is a failure to conform to expected norms. Such a mistake will assuredly incite the operation of state censorship laws and other legal and institutional means to put everything back into its designated place.<sup>113</sup>

With respect to gender under the Thai regime of images, the public display of normative masculinity and femininity is permitted while transgenderism and homosexuality must be consigned to the private domain. With this juxtaposition of public decency and private choice, the Thai state on the surface does not seem to criminalize homosexuality or transgenderism or intervene into individual's private sexual lives. Nonetheless, the public representation of gender/sex minorities in electronic media has developed into an issue of contention since the 1980s.<sup>114</sup> On one hand, a range of state institutions that includes the police, academics, state-based medical and health professionals, and the Office of National Culture Commission are all enveloped in monitoring the propriety of public images of the bodies of Thai men and women. Media owners, journalists, and civil society, on the other hand, have resisted the strict definition of proper public behavior propagated by state bureaucracy and authorities.<sup>115</sup> As the media and society grew more critical of a binary gender configuration, the stronghold of this gender culture on Thai lives began to fragment. At the same time, in order to uphold its standards of morally appropriate public behavior, the state has refused to broaden its views on eroticism and indecency.

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Jackson, "Offending Images: Gender and Sexual Minorities, and State Control of the Media in Thailand," in *Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, ed. Russell H.K. Heng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 2000), 205.

<sup>114</sup> Jackson (2000), 201.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 208.

State censorship of representations of sex/gender minorities revolves around Thai notions of obscenity. In pre-1850 Thai culture, it was not the public display of sexual organs but the expression of sexual emotion that was perceived as obscene. The exposure of the naked body started to be a legally punishable act in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Western notions of public modesty and propriety was adopted. The modern Thai body, encompassing “the public enactment and fashioning of masculinity and femininity along Western lines,” is now become an object policed by Thai obscenity laws.<sup>116</sup> If this regime heavily restricts and regulates the circulation of images of Thai bodies, what can the Thai viewer see on television?

Since homosexuality and transgenderism in Thai society lie outside the bounds of convention, such sexual orientations have been previously painted as a form of defiance and an epidemic social problem. But Thai television has long been flooded with male-bodied effeminacy as *katoey* and gays have hosted talk shows and frequently been guests on entertainment programs. State anxieties about the high number of images of non-normative sexual behaviors in media was reflected in a government attempt to ban television programs featuring frivolous shows of transvestites and transsexuals under the directive of then Prime Minister Chuan Leepai in 1999.<sup>117</sup> The continued hypervisibility of the *katoey* prompted the Minister of Education under the Thaksin government in 2004 to request a reduction in queer characters in television because they were not good role models for children. Queer representations on television were seen as more glamorized and hence more likely to be emulated. Queerness was at once both fashionable and contagious.<sup>118</sup> The saturation of the image of the *katoey* has notably spilled over to the small screen. The *katoey*

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<sup>116</sup> Jackson (2000), 207. Jackson draws on the work of Nithi Aeusrivongse (1990).

<sup>117</sup> Jackson (2000), 209-211, 221.

<sup>118</sup> Dredge Kang, “Queer Media Loci in Bangkok: Paradise Lost and Found in Translation,” *GLQ* 17.1 (2010): 175.

also still reigns as the dominant visual representation of queerness in larger society, suggesting that the private/public divide under the regime of images is not as stringent as Jackson supposes.

But representations of queerness in Thai mass media can only push against the boundaries. The *katoey* in mainstream queer cinema, for instance, illustrates the limits of the queer challenge to heteronormativity. The post-2000 wave of Thai queer cinema treated transgenderism and homosexuality more sensitively rather than reduced *katoeys* to the “stereotypical roles of screaming clowns.”<sup>119</sup> Yet, this new agency granted to *katoeys* in these films was exercised more for becoming a good member of Thai society than for contesting underlying power structures. *Katoeys* were “cinematically integrated into the national narrative of group-centrism and sacrifice” in which they were presented as more compassionate, tolerant and capable of enduring suffering.<sup>120</sup> Cinematic representations did not provoke state censors as long as they address alternative sexual positioning within these predetermined confines of subjectivity. This pattern of standardizing the figure of queerness suggests that homosexuality can be neutralized, normalized, and even cured.

Representations of queerness in *lakorn* follow suit. *Katoey* and effeminate gay men are usually casted in comic relief roles in Thai soaps. Similar to film, these characters are in minor roles of the best friend or sidekick whose flamboyant mannerisms and silly tantrums balance the sentimental, melodramatic sequences of the *lakorn*. Appearances of lesbians or *dii* are highly uncommon and negligible at best, usually in roles of servants and everyday workers.<sup>121</sup> Unlike in

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<sup>119</sup> Serhat Ünalı, “Back in the spotlight: the cinematic regime of representation of Kathoey and gay men in Thailand.” in *Queer Bangkok: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Markets, Media and Rights*, ed. by Peter Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 64.

<sup>120</sup> Ünalı, 68-70.

<sup>121</sup> Recent *lakorn* with queer female characters: *Panyachon Kon Krua* (ปัญญาชนก้นครัว – Ch.3, 2012), *Full House* (ขุนนัก รักเต็มบ้าน – TrueVisions, 2014); *Lakorn* with heterosexual female characters dressing up as men: *Sompong Nong Somchai* (สมปองน้องสมชาย - Ch.3, 2004), *Taddao Bussaya* (ตัดดาวบุษยา - Ch.3, 2009), *Dok Ruk Rim Tan* (ดอกรักริมทาง – Ch. 5, 2010), *Ngao Kammathep* (เงากระทะ – Ch.7, 2010), *Coffee Prince* (กาแฟปรีนซ์ ไทย TrueVisions, 2012); *Lakorn* with heterosexual male characters dressing up as women: *Khun Mae Jum Lang* (คุณแม่จ๋าแลง – Ch.3, 2009). TrueVisions, 2012); *Lakorn* with heterosexual male characters dressing up as women: *Khun Mae Jum Lang* (คุณแม่จ๋าแลง – Ch.3, 2009).

film, there has never been a *lakorn* in which the main lead is a queer character. In mid-2009, *Prajan See Roong* (พระจันทร์สีรุ้ง, The Rainbow Moon – Ch.3) was a top rated soap that prominently featured a *katoey* character who was not in the typical comedic role for the entirety of its run. But the *katoey* in question sacrifices his/her transgender identity and lives as an effeminate man in order to provide his adopted son with a better family environment.<sup>122</sup> The queer character is once again pacified and recast to fall within Thai standards on family values and public identity. Later in the year, *Proong Nee Kor Ruk Ter* (พรุ่งนี้ก็รักเธอ, Tomorrow, I'll Still Love You – Ch.5) followed the budding romantic relationship between its two supporting male characters, both of whom were neither *katoey* or effeminate. Their homosexual courtship, however, was told through a storyline of unrequited love growing into mutual attraction, implying that the definitive struggle of male homosexual romance is not social stigmatization but a simple matter of recognizing one's own feelings.



Illustration 3.1: Actor Aof Pongpat in the role of a *katoey* in *Prajan See Roong*

<sup>122</sup> Kang, 176.

The *katoey* character is played by Aof Pongpat Wachirabunjong whose son in the *lakorn* is played by Bie Sukrit. Aof Pongpat won the award for best supporting actor in a *lakorn* for this role at the first annual Nataraja Awards, Star Entertainment Awards, and the Kom Chad Leuk Awards. Coincidentally, Aof is the director of the hit film *Me...Myself* (2008) in which the male lead, Tan, loses his memory and eventually discovers that he is in fact a *katoey*. The ending of the film suggests that gender is not biologically determined, but socially constructed since Tan was constantly exposed to the *katoey* lifestyle during his upbringing. Viewers are led to believe that Tan will willingly pursue a heterosexual life with his female love interest.

Despite the developments beyond the stereotypical queer character, portrayals of *katoey* and gay men seem to only make it as far as major supporting roles. Furthermore, for gay male characters to have substantial airtime, their homosexuality is often kept secret or underplayed on screen.<sup>123</sup> Female homosexuality is almost completely absent from the *lakorn*. Producers exercise self-censorship when they typecast the gay or transgender character to adhere to a certain pattern of queer representation on screen. Male and female homosexuality is subsumed under a heteronormative narrative trajectory that has yet to cast queer characters as leads. This relegation of queerness into marginal spaces on Thai soaps unveils another facet of state television censorship. Censorship in the Thai context is not the explicit prohibition of an inventory of specified images and sounds. At times, it is invisible and untraceable. Censorship does not consist of the cutting out or exclusion of queer characters but it is rather embedded in incongruous but authoritative systems of social norms and expectations that actually *allows* for the inclusion of standardized queer images. Consequently, queerness does exist in *lakorn* but in a normalized form and only in the periphery as in Thai society.

### **To the Skies**

The key “figures” of any social process, formation or revolution can offer insights into its ideological foundations and their contestations. Figures, as persons who encourage reflexive contemplation about the world in which they live, embody local and national discourses about contemporary social life and its future. They mark the contextualized manifestations of a particular historical moment and its given large-scale processes, structures of feeling, and symbolic

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<sup>123</sup> *Lakorn* with gay male characters: *Botan Kleep Sudtai* (โบตันกลีบสุดท้าย – Ch.3, 2008), *Jai Rao* (ใจร้าย - Ch. 3, 2008), *Plerng See Roong* (เพลิงสีรุ้ง – Ch.3, 2009), *Qi Pao* (กิแพ้ว - Ch.3, 2013)

significations.<sup>124</sup> A Thai figure of femininity can therefore provide insight into the social experiences, historical currents, and affective regimes of modern womanhood in the country. In her discussion of the lived reality of female Thai Airways flight attendants, Jane Ferguson argues that they occupy this liminal structural role in Thai modernity. While they stand for the country's pace in terms of technological advances in air travel, they also promote traditionalism by wearing bright uniforms with the Thai sarong and sash. While they are recruited disproportionately from Bangkok's upper middle class and highly educated, they are explicitly objectified and eroticized in advertisement campaign slogans like "Smooth as Silk" and "We love you as much as heaven." As a marketed icon of and for Thai femininity, female flight attendants especially must contend with the many complexities of gender, class and emotional work.<sup>125</sup> In other words, modern Thai femininity has been instilled on and advertised through the figure of the female flight attendant. This figure comes attached with its own assumptions and strains on the affective disposition of real Thai women working in cabins in the skies. Their simultaneous objectification and iconization makes their portrayal in *lakorn* a point of contention.

The public outrage over the portrayal of female flight attendants in *Songkram Nangfah*, with which I opened this chapter, illustrates these very tensions. *Songkram Nangfah* was originally a story by Royreudee Kenny. Going by a pen name, Airkee, she wrote an autobiographical account of her former life as an air stewardess and posted it on Pantip. Her writing titled "My Melancholic Life – True Story from the Computer" was an instant online hit and turned into a novel in March 2007.<sup>126</sup> Exact received her consent to turn the 200-page bestseller into a *lakorn* for Channel 5.

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<sup>124</sup> Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist, "Introduction," in *Figures of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 1-3.

<sup>125</sup> Jane M. Ferguson, "Thailand," in *Figures of Southeast Asia*, ed. Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 118-119

<sup>126</sup> Mayuree Sukyingcharoenwong, "Angels on warpath," *The Nation*, March 13, 2008.



*Songkram Nangfah* follows Rin, a 21-year-old beautiful flight attendant for Mekla Air. She begins to fall for the subtle charms of a senior pilot, In. His displays of affection for her spark the furious wrath of her work rival and nemesis, Noi, who had long set her eyes on In. Meanwhile, Ning, also a pilot in the same airline, explores his growing attraction to Rin who he sees as the next target of his philandering wiles. He pursues her despite his ongoing relationship with Rin's close friend and colleague, Gib. To make matters even worse, In is finalizing a bitter divorce with his wife, whose rage and resentment land squarely on Rin as the new woman caught in the middle of their failing marriage.<sup>127</sup> Despite her innocence, Rin's life is relentlessly complicated by the devious ploys and hysteric theatrics of these female characters.



Illustration 3.2: Promotional poster for *Songkram Nangfah* which stars Bee Namthip Jongrachatawiboon as Rin, Kong Saharat Sangkapricha as In and Pong Nawat Kulrattanakarn as Ning

The title of the *lakorn* translates literally as “War of the Angels.” This strategic choice of words by the producers demonstrates their conflation of the grace and beauty of angels to that of Thai female stewardesses. But the irony is that the angels of Mekla Air are not entangled in a

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<sup>127</sup> “Ruang Yaw Lakorn Songkram Nangfah [Synopsis of War of the Angels],” *Kapook!*, accessed February 19, 2014 <<http://drama.kapook.com/view26805.html>>.

ferocious war with demons and devils but with each other. Both the popularity and condemnation of the *lakorn* are driven by the decadence of sex and sexuality on screen. The excess of sexualized activities materialized in the form of female air hostesses prancing around in short skirts and engaging in fits of derogatory name-calling and fierce face-slapping all in the pursuit of romantic love. Viewers are introduced to the character of Noi when she chastises and physically bullies Rin during their very first encounter. They meet In's wife when she chances upon Rin and her husband exchanging loving gazes and soft caresses at the airport. She proceeds to cause a public raucous to condemn Rin for deliberately being a homewrecker. When Gib grows distrustful of Ning's attentiveness to Rin, she takes it out on Rin through a manic episode of verbal defamation and accusation in between incessant hair-pulling, pushing and slapping. The maliciousness between the women at war occurred in only the first five episodes.



Illustration 3.3: Catfight scene between Rin and Noi (Episode 5)

The union was horrified by this damning and damaging characterization of their flight crews, asserting that this kind of conduct never happens. In the meeting to discuss their plan to elicit the interference of the Ministry of Culture, officials expressed concerns that such pejorative scenes will discourage people from choosing this line of work since the show ignored the safety and customer service work done by flight crews. Besides petitioning the Ministry of Culture to

take action on the steamy drama, the livid union implored Thai airlines' executives to withdraw their sponsorship if Exact fail to meet their demands that the story be adjusted to be less suggestive that the characters represented real airline staff. The producer, however, believed that the *lakorn* reflected all sides of the profession, albeit more dramatized.<sup>128</sup> The negotiations between the union and the production company hinged on a dispute on two interconnected issues: the realism of the *lakorn* and the moral depravity of its characters. The debate was about whether or not the sinful behavior of the characters, mainly the women, was depicted in a distorted, unrealistic light.

It seems astonishing that Channel 5 elected to resolve the scandal by simply lengthening the skirts worn by the female flight attendants in the *lakorn* without much change to the story or its allusions. Despite their superficiality, surfaces in Thailand matter quite a bit. These surfaces are gendered and easily transformed through presentations and everyday practices that focus on women as visual icons. Gendered practices such as beauty contests fetishize national images which serve to exoticize and reify the essence of Thainess in order to enhance the country's international reputation and tourist appeal.<sup>129</sup> It is not just inner beauty that counts. Standards of physical beauty for Thai women have become ever more demanding. The marketing of female Thai beauty in the global consumer culture has continually created new paragons of beauty. The Eurasian face is admired on Thai television and in beauty pageants. Advertisements in glossy magazines show a clear preference for models who are light-skinned with Eurasian features as a kind of pan-Asian standard of beauty.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, beautiful surfaces matter even more. Penny Van Esterik believes that "the moral power of beauty and the extreme objectification of women intersect in contemporary Thailand." Internal attributes such as gentleness, subservience, and virtue are

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<sup>128</sup> "Soap has Thai crew in a lather," *BBC News*, January 21, 2008.

When *Songkram Nangfah* was exported to China, many of the scenes with a gay male character were edited out.

<sup>129</sup> Van Esterik, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, "Predicaments of Modern Thai History," *South East Asian Research* 2.1 (1993): 75.

configured into a construction of external beauty that stresses grace and composure.<sup>131</sup> With this in mind, the toning down of the exposure of skin and the frequency of catfights might not be that baffling. Its purpose was to keep up appearances in the sense of minimizing the severity of the situation at hand and of upholding the cultural models of feminine beauty.

At the end of its 34-episode run, the show pulled in ratings as high as 12, an incredible feat for Channel 5. But the gossip did not stop there. The fictional Rin married Ning after an unplanned pregnancy only to catch him in a long-term affair with his mistress, Cherry. The real Rin, the author of the original book, divorced her husband after years of marriage. He went on to marry the woman with whom he was committing adultery. Following the airing of *Songkram Nangfah*, the author ignited another media firestorm by posting old photographs of that woman, who was assumed to be the real-life Cherry, on the internet. Her actions led to her arrest and a subsequent legal battle.<sup>132</sup> This was an ill-conceived attempt by the author to insinuate that the story which inspired the *lakorn* stayed true to her own personal life of hardship and heartbreak at the hands of immoral others.

The sensationalization of the entire ordeal underscores the thin line between reality and drama. What was (over)acting was construed as real. What was real was turned into entertainment. The spectacle of it all was grounded on the fatality of feminine sexuality and sexual desires. The public controversy of *Songkram Nangfah* revealed the existing contestations of Thai gender politics. The problem and its immediate resolution rested on skirt length and the number of jealousy-induced rages among the women in the drama. The call for intervention to the Ministry of Culture highlights how the *lakorn* has become a space of cultural expression but one that requires scrutiny and supervision. Censorship is not a coherent and cohesive enterprise. There is a

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<sup>131</sup> Van Esterik, 129.

<sup>132</sup> *The Nation*, March 13, 2008.

multiplicity of actors at play to make demands and claims about their representation on screen. This particular scenario illustrates how the state, producers and spectators meet at the censor interface to negotiate the boundaries of appropriate feminine decorum. By the end of the quarrel surrounding *Songkram Nangfah*, the lesson learned is not to complicate prevailing perceptions on femininity but to temporarily mitigate the occasional public uproar. *Lakorn* can show skin and slaps, but not so gratuitously as to challenge conventions of female propriety and modesty.

### **Career Promiscuity**

The conceptualization of the figure of a Thai man and woman is inextricably interlaced with aspects of Theravada Buddhism. Charles Keyes argues that the Thai Buddhist world is built and upheld by fundamental doctrines communicated through rituals, the teachings of the Buddha and practices. This Buddhist world view delineates a culture of gender in Thailand that distinguishes between males and females on account of given attributes. He identifies the dominant image of a Thai woman in popular Buddhist texts as that of a mother whose “natural” role is primarily as nurturer of her family and of Buddhist institutions through her ritual activities and giving birth to sons who will become monks.<sup>133</sup> Thomas Kirsch alternatively discusses the Thai division of labor and Buddhist sex roles through a general property that men and women share in common: degree of attachment. He concluded that “women are deemed to be more firmly rooted in their worldly attachments than are men, men are thought to be more ready to give up such attachment.”<sup>134</sup> Despite their disagreements, both authors suggest that core values embodied in Buddhism such as attachment, merit, karma, and morality have strikingly configured themselves onto normative understandings of Thai sex roles and gender culture.

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<sup>133</sup> Charles Keyes, “Mother or Mistress, but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand,” *American Ethnologists* 11.2 (May 1984): 223-227.

<sup>134</sup> A. Thomas Kirsch, “Text and Context: Buddhist Sex Roles/Culture of Gender Revisited,” *American Ethnologist* 12.2 (May 1985): 303-304. He draws from his previous work (Kirsch 1975) to contrast with Keyes’ findings.

If contradictory views on the natural roles of men and women are nevertheless underpinned by principles governing a Thai Buddhist world as envisioned by its believers, it is not surprising when *Dok Som See Thong* (ดอกส้มสีทอง – Ch.3, 2011) both enthralled and repulsed viewers. *Dok Som See Thong* was the highly popular sequel to *Mongkut Dok Som* (มงกุฎดอกส้ม - Ch.3, 2010), both of which were originally novels by Taitao Sucharitakul (ถ่ายเถา สุจริตกุล) under the same titles. *Mongkut Dok Som* achieved moderate success with its tales of the quarrels and misfortunes within a multi-generational Chinese magnate family under its 60-year-old prideful patriarch, Cheng Seu Kiang. He is a powerful businessman whose fear of aging and loss of prestige compels him to seek out young wives. His latest wife is Kumkaew, a desolate girl who marries him at the age of 15. Her dream of a blissful marital life is deferred only momentarily until the arrival of the oldest son, Kongkiat. The *lakorn* is about the trials of Kumkaew's and Kongkiat's love due to its seeming impossibility and taboo. The storyline is also anchored in the scheming, deceit and conflict between the first two wives for control over family affairs.<sup>135</sup> *Dok Som See Thong* premiered less than two months after the end of its prequel and launched a Thai social craze coined under the namesake of the female lead character. The fixation on the *lakorn* by audiences and censor officials was fittingly called the Reya Phenomenon (ปรากฏการณ์เรยา).<sup>136</sup>

From its very first episode, *Dok Som See Thong* proved to be pushing the envelope with the explicitness of Reya's sexual escapades. The story follows her endeavor to escape poverty by sleeping with as many men as necessary. Reya initially stays with her mother who is a live-in

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<sup>135</sup> "Lakorn Mongkut Dok Som [Drama Orange Blossom Crown]," *THAIV3*, accessed March 1, 2014 <<http://www.thaitv3.com/เรื่องย่อละคร/109/มงกุฎดอกส้ม.html>>.

<sup>136</sup> The Reya phenomenon continued even after the success of the *lakorn* when Chompoo Araya won the award for best leading actress in a *lakorn* for her portrayal of Reya at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nataraja Awards. She then reprised her role in the stage production, *Reya: The Musical* which played at the Aksra Theatre at the King Power Complex from September to October of 2012 - "Pon rang wan Nataraja krang thi 3 [Results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nataraja Awards]," *Rakdara*, May 21, 2012, accessed March 1, 2014 <<http://rakdara.net/overview.php?c=2&id=25443>>; "Reaching Out to Reya," *The Nation*, September 14, 2012.

servant for a Caucasian couple. She repeatedly ignores her mother's advice and rudely complains about her mother's lowly social status. Her thirst for easy fortune motivates her to apply for a position coincidentally as a flight attendant for Siam Airlines in order to snag the married Sing, the airline's Director of Human Resources. She soon discovers that Sing was under financial constraints due to the suspicions of his wife, who as the only daughter of an affluent and influential baron was the actual wealthy person. When Reya realizes that Sing was no longer a viable option, she moves onto Yai or Kongkiat, the eldest married son of Cheng and his first wife. She deviously seduces him under a façade of innocent infatuation. Though Yai takes care of her after her pregnancy with his first child, he continues to stay married to his wife. Reya holds onto to him in hopes of having her son be legally instated as the first grandson and main inheritor of the Cheng family fortune in the future. Since Yai shows hesitance, she meets and dates the handsome CK. Little does she know that CK happens to be the son of Cheng and his third wife and is planted by Yai, his older half-brother, to test her sincerity.<sup>137</sup>



Illustration 3.4: Promotional poster for *Dok Som See Thong* starring Chompoo Araya Hargate as Reya and as Aun Witaya Wasukraipaisarn as Khun Yai (Kongkiat)

<sup>137</sup> “Lakorn Dok Som See Thong [Drama Golden Orange Blossom],” *THAIV3*, accessed March 1, 2014 <<http://www.thaitv3.com/ละคร/122/ดอกส้มสีทอง.html>>.

From start to finish, Reya uses her body as a source of livelihood in her desperate search for riches and status. In the midst of airing, *Dok Som See Thong* incited widespread social criticism for its unabashed exhibitionism of her sexual exploits. Ladda Tangsupachai, the Director of the Cultural Surveillance Center (ศูนย์การเฝ้าระวังทางวัฒนธรรม กระทรวงวัฒนธรรม) under the Ministry of Culture, came out to issue a statement after the Ministry's hotline 1765 was flooded with complaints from alarmed parents asking the Ministry to examine the *lakorn* for content that might be inappropriate for children and youth. She summarized their distress as predicated on Reya's lack of respect for her mother and her sleeping around with different men. The Center could not step in at this point because Channel 3 did not violate any regulations insofar as issuing a rating of N 13+ for its broadcast. Ladda confirmed that the report was forwarded to the Minister of Culture, Nipit Intarasombut, for further investigation.<sup>138</sup> Channel 3 stated that they could not change the storyline because the entire *lakorn* was already in post-production and scheduled to air. Bowing to the backlash, the channel raised the content rating to 18+ and deleted several scenes to avoid another round of critique. The Minister of Culture examined the report and issued a follow-up statement in which he said that even a rating of 50+ would not solve the problem of children sneaking to watch the drama.<sup>139</sup>

The portrayal of Reya as cunning mistress was at the root of the obsession and disgust with *Dok Som See Thong*. Her adept duplicity in presenting herself as a pitiful, naïve woman hides her complete disregard for morality. The “Reya Phenomenon,” a term used by the press, fans and

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<sup>138</sup> “Sai duan thaep mai at ‘Reya’ lae phor mae rong khor ra ngap [The hotline was scorched and jammed, ‘Reya’ responsible for parents requesting for cancellation],” *Thairath*, April 28, 2011, accessed March 1, 2014 <<https://www.thairath.co.th/content/edu/167547>>.

<sup>139</sup> “Ror mor wor Watthanataam rap ‘Reya’ mai day juak phrap raet ting kor rai pon [The Minister of Culture cannot accept Reya and believes that adjusting the rating will be futile],” *Thairath*, April 29, 2011, accessed March 1, 2014 <<https://www.thairath.co.th/content/edu/167834>>.



critics, attests to the disproportionate amount of attention paid to the character or more precisely, to her careerist promiscuity and its repercussions for the youth segment of the viewing audience. Keyes argues that Thai women are not inevitably bound by their passionate attachments to the world, but can recognize the truth of Buddha's teaching about suffering through their own experiences of loss.<sup>140</sup> Even women who work as prostitutes can evoke the traditional image of woman as nurturing mother because they may be constrained by conditions beyond their control.<sup>141</sup> This suggests that women are not inherently flawed but are willed by their circumstances to sin. The possibility of this interpretation by viewers of the soap is nullified by the fact that Reya lack such recognition. Reya's own dissatisfaction with her social and financial standing propels her to sin. The definitive objective of her schemes is material wealth. Such worldly attachments compel her to privilege her own desires over the losses of others. On this self-destructive path, Reya does not show guilt in destroying families and friendships as she lies and cheats to get her way. In the crudest words, Reya was eagerly honing her craft as a professional homewrecker. Naturally, this did not receive rave endorsement from conservative parents and cultural policy officials.

*Dok Som See Thong* elucidates this double standard between female wantonness and male philandering. The Cheng patriarch lusts for young wives despite the damage inflicted on his family. However, his polygamy, his son's incest<sup>142</sup> and the adultery committed by several male characters in both installations were not the impetuses for scandal and censorship. Only when Reya is presented as sexually loose are her misdeeds perceived as destructive to stability and sanctity of the Thai family in the *lakorn* and blasphemous for the Thai families watching.

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<sup>140</sup> Keyes, 232.

<sup>141</sup> Keyes, 237.

<sup>142</sup> In the conclusion of *Mongkut Dok Som*, Kumkaew goes mentally insane after witnessing Yai, her own lover, sleeping with one of his father's wives and also another man while in a drunken state.

The consolidation of an ideal model of the Thai family occurred under the reign of Rama VI. Legal reformers and King Vajiravudh himself endeavored to standardize Siam's institution of the family through print media and legal codes.<sup>143</sup> Linked to a larger state-building project, the "crisis of wifedom" engendered new discourses on the modern family and proper female sexuality. Siamese nationalism was propagated with a moral conception of family largely defined by "heterosexual sexual practices within a long-term martial union." Women were supposed to be good mothers who raised their sons to be honest, polite and good husbands in the future. Women who did not act according to the newly legitimated roles in the family were condemned under the new dogma of national belonging. The stabilization of the monogamous heterosexual union as the ideal and identifiable family union anchored Thai national identity.<sup>144</sup> Inscribed onto Reya is a wide-ranging set of social, cultural, and religious expectations under a standard of the Thai family. In this case, censorship took the form of pressure on the producers to meet these expectations.

Once her deceit is exposed, Reya is castigated and ostracized for her lack of virtue. Yai's wife, Narudee, replaces Reya as the mother figure for his son. The first grandson is ceremoniously presented to the Cheng household that is shaken from past trials but ready to move on. Only when she is abandoned and alone at the very end does Reya begin to realize her selfishness, greed and faults. The closing montage displayed scenes in which various characters voice their opinions about the requirements of a respectable marriage. The last scene of the *lakorn* is a segment featuring a leading Thai Buddhist monk, Phra Maha Vudhijaya Vajiramedhi, preaching about how to watch *Dok Som See Thong* in order to learn from its messages about familial relationships and

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<sup>143</sup> Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 130-131.

<sup>144</sup> Loos, 153-155.

values.<sup>145</sup> The clear Buddhist overtones of this extended ending sequence suggests that efforts to censor *Dok Som See Thong* aimed to maintain the parameters of acceptable roles for women in the family, marriage and society. Censorship acted as a yardstick for the appropriate bounds of feminine desires and Thai family values that could appear on screen.



Illustration 3.5: Left – Ending where Reya is sobbing alone (Episode 16); Right – Monk explaining how to watch *Dok Som See Thong* with a critical mind

### **Faith and Farang**

*Fah Jarod Sai* (ฟ้าจรดทราย - Ch.7, 2013) is the latest *lakorn* to be tested at the censor interface. While this scandal again revolved around the main female protagonist, this case was an intriguing departure from the previous two. Based on a novel by the prolific writer Sopak Suwan, *Fah Jarod Sai* is an epic adventure story of a mixed-race orphan traveling from a convent in France to a foreign Arab land to prove her own self-worth. Michelle de la Roni is abandoned by her relatives because of her mixed blood and is raised by Catholic nuns. After finishing college in Paris, Michelle de la Roni follows her best friend, Kashfiya, who heads home to the distant desert kingdom of Hilfara. Michelle teaches French to children at the same school set up by Kashfiya in her family's mansion. King Ahmed, Sultan of Hilfara, believes Kasfiya to be the woman who will

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<sup>145</sup> For more information about this well-known monk (พระมหาวิมลชัย วชิรเมธี): <https://www.facebook.com/v.vajiramedhi>; [http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/พระมหาวิมลชัย\\_วชิรเมธี](http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/พระมหาวิมลชัย_วชิรเมธี).

bear him his first heir as foretold by the royal soothsayer. Kashfiya devises a plan to send Michelle as a substitute bride in fear that Michelle will steal her French lover who has also come to Hilfara. After Michelle's arrival at the palace, Oman, a relative of the King, stages an uprising to usurp the throne for himself. Believing that King Ahmed is dead, Sharif, a royal officer and confidant of the King, flees into the desert with Michelle to escape the rebel army. *Fah Jarod Sai* focuses on their many hardships while trying to survive in the grueling desert.<sup>146</sup> The author had spent some time living in the Middle East to do research for this book which was first published in 1974 and has since been reprinted on several occasions. Before hitting the small screen, it was made into a stage musical in 2007.<sup>147</sup> Despite previous successes in print and on stage, the story was problematic in its *lakorn* interpretation. After the first four episodes were broadcasted, *Fah Jarod Sai* because the cause of major tension between channel executives, state bodies and religious groups as all sides deliberated over the adequate mode of censorship.



Illustration 3.6: Promotional poster for *Fah Jarod Sai* which stars Kwan Usamane Vaithayanon as Michelle de la Roni, Tui Teerapat Satjakul as Sharif, and Aimee Morakot Kittisara as Kashfiya

<sup>146</sup> “Ruang Yaw Fah Jarod Sai [Synopsis of Fah Jarod Sai],” *Channel 7*, accessed March 1, 2014  
<<http://drama.ch7.com/detail/41238/ฟ้าจรดทราย.html>>.

<sup>147</sup> “Fah Jarod Sai [Where the Sky Meets the Sand],” *Goodreads*, accessed April 2, 2014  
<<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3366620-1-2>>.

For more on the musical: <http://www.rachadalai.com/fahjarodsai/>; Sopak Suwan (โสภาค สุวรรณ, penname of Rampaian Suwarnasarn Srisopark (รำไพพรรณ สุวรรณสาร), was named one of Thailand's National Artist in 2013.

On August 22, 2013, the Muslims for Peace Foundation, an Islamic advocacy group based in Bangkok, filed a petition to have *Fah Jarod Sai* taken off air. In their document handed to Bangkok Broadcasting and Television (BBTV), the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Minister, Mr. Anudith Nakornthap, and the National Broadcast and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), the Muslim group claimed that the *lakorn* misrepresents the Islamic religion and defames its practitioners. *Fai Jarod Sai* allegedly distorts the teachings of Islam and disrespects and ridicules its believers. The drama misleads viewers into thinking that Islam condones cruelty to women and children. The group is particularly incensed by the depiction of Hilfara as an Islamic kingdom that restricts its Muslim women from receiving an education which is contrary to Muslim belief. The Foundation believes this could have widespread and unpredictable effects on Muslims if the NBTC do not order its cancellation.<sup>148</sup>

*Fah Jarod Sai* was a large project under DaraDVO that took over three years in the making due to unforeseen hindrances in casting, production costs, and scheduling.<sup>149</sup> So when it finally aired, Channel 7 was reluctant to cancel this expensive show in fear of losing its returns on the investment. The channel responded a few days later in defense of its production. After receiving the complaint from the Foundation, Bangkok Broadcast Television (BBTV), which operates Channel 7 under a commission by the Royal Thai Army, issued a statement affirming that they had no intention to insult Islam or its followers. Managing director of BBTV, Palakon Somsuwan, explained that the company conducted a review and decided to move forward with the airing. The broadcaster insisted that the aim was to remain faithful to the original novel in its portrayal of

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<sup>148</sup> “Muslim group want soap opera axed,” *Bangkok Post*, August 23, 2013.

<sup>149</sup> “Aaathan Fah Jarod Sai 10 pii haeng kaan ror khoy [Magical Fah Jarod Sai 10 years of waiting],” *Komchadluek*, February 7, 2011, accessed March 10, 2014  
<<http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20110207/88075/อาถรรพณ์‘ฟ้าจรดทราย’กว่า10ปีแห่งการรอคอย.html#Ux-eXPmwLI0>>.

fictional events for the purpose of entertainment. The production company, DaraVDO, reiterated those sentiments and added that it had submitted the scripts of all twelve episodes translated into English to the Egyptian embassy and the Culture Ministry of Egypt for examination before filming.<sup>150</sup> The reaction on both sides was centered on the question of religious authenticity.

Accuracy in religious representation was lodged once more in the depiction of the conduct and agency of (Muslim) women. In *Fah Jarod Sai*, Michelle and Kashfiya are character foils of each other. Kashfiya, an Islamic woman, is corrupted by the freedom she experiences while studying abroad. She defies her faith when she takes on a French lover, Robert, and invites him to continue their intimate relationship in her homeland. When she suspects Michelle as the reason for Robert's change of heart, Kashfiya takes the opportunity to send her friend to the royal palace, knowing that Michelle will likely face a death sentence for attempted espionage or insurgency. Michelle, on the other hand, is reserved, studious, well-mannered and considerate. But as a French citizen and practicing Catholic, it is difficult for her to accept the religious foundations of her new setting. Her Otherness in terms of faith and nationality is repeatedly noted and juxtaposed against a male-dominated Arab kingdom. She is told to wear the Muslim headdress and cover her face when she sees men approaching. She is taught that men and women live separately in Hilfara because women and children have little say in the choices in life. She witnesses acts of gender violence on women and their silent compliancy. She is reminded that women are persecuted, sometimes by public stoning, for transgressions against the orthodox Islamic way. Using these tropes of female oppression under Islam, *Fah Jarod Sai* could not bypass the censor interface.

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<sup>150</sup> "Channel 7 defends 'Arab' soup," *Bangkok Post*, August 24, 2013.



Illustration 3.7: Michelle witnesses instances of punishment and violence levied on Muslim women in Hilfara (Episode 1-2)

The solution was to revise the script and production of the remaining eight episodes. Experts from the Sheikhul Islam Office (จุฬาราชมนตรี) met with the producers to review the script to ensure that the rest of the *lakorn* accurately depicted the Muslim religion and culture.<sup>151</sup> The *lakorn* was eventually slimmed down to eleven episodes.<sup>152</sup> The case of *Fah Jarod Sai* does not represent a direct compromise or concession, but surprisingly, a collaboration of sorts at the censor interface. Despite its emphasis on the positionality of women in Islam, censorship resulted not in an evaluation of their conditions of autonomy or lack thereof. Rather, it was a joint attempt by state officials, religious leaders and television executives to shed more positive light on patriarchy under Islam. Seen in this way, the collaboration was a public relations campaign to carve out a polished representation of the Muslim faith.

<sup>151</sup> “Experts to help show reflect Islam,” *Bangkok Post*, August 25, 2013.

<sup>152</sup> After suffering many trials traveling with Sharif through the desert, Michelle finds herself in the throes of death. Michelle and Sharif are able to reunite with King Admed who is in fact alive and has defeated Oman’s army forces. Once at the palace, Michelle recovers from her ailments. With the country still shaken from the rebellion, Sharif feels obliged to serve the throne and rebuild Hilfara. But as royalty, he must marry a woman from Hilfara and appoint her as his queen. Michelle does not want to pressure him into giving up his title and avoiding his duty to the country. She decides to return to France. In the end, however, King Admed acknowledges the extent of their love and grant their marriage. The pair have a lavish wedding and together help to bring peace and progress to Hilfara.

## Conclusion: It's a Man's World

Soaps and femininity have been in a dialectical relationship from the onset. Arguably, soaps and feminism have too. Post-1960s second-wave feminism in the United States saw the emergence of key texts such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, and Sheila Rowbotham's *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* that raised concerns about the ways in which women are represented. In the following decades, the growth of mass produced genres of femininity such as the romance fiction, film melodrama, "weepies," women's magazines, and of course, the television soap opera have sparked the interests of many feminist scholars.<sup>153</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon and those before her asks the simple question: Why were feminists interested in the soap opera?

Since its inception as U.S. radio serials, the soap opera has been a woman's genre, marketed specifically at female audiences. A structural shift in the field of western feminist studies in the 1970s then launched the slogan of "the personal is political." This theoretical impulse pushed feminist research to examine not the exceptional, but the everyday and how women's intimate oppression in the home, relationships and families was consensually secured. The crucial object of study was then the media construction and representation of women's personal lives.<sup>154</sup> The feminist encounter with the soap opera shepherded a new phase of feminist media scholarship that explores the interwoven relationship between the figure of the woman and a feminized genre. The soap thus became a central site for investigating the gendered nature of television media.

But gender categories and representations have not been the crux of the Thai women's movement. Since its birth alongside the students' movement in the mid-1970s, the women's

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<sup>153</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, "The role of soap opera in the development of feminist television scholarship," in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50-51.

<sup>154</sup> Brunsdon, 58-59.



movement in Thailand has struggled with being in the shadows of student activism and against state ideologies.<sup>155</sup> Feminism in Thailand as an academic theory and social movement aims more to alter gender inequality and oppression in society. Feminists advocate for the inclusion of women in the positions of decision-making in conjunction with their liberation from the unequal power structures. But the women's movement was and is by no means free from differences in theoretical stances and forms of engagement. Some demand higher pay and safer work environments. Many are concerned with the "glass ceiling" preventing the advancement of women in organizations and politics. Others stress the need for equal political and legal rights and protection against sexual violence. Women's groups target problems such as prostitution, sex tourism, and HIV/AIDS.<sup>156</sup> Thus, feminism in the Thai context is configured by a diverse set of issues. Still, more attention needs to be paid to the *lakorn* for its fair share of scandalizing the images of women.

The cases presented in this chapter paint a convoluted portrait of censorship. Censorship of soaps that diverge from conventional notions about gender roles and sexual desires has been instigated by various groups and emerged in various forms. The common thread is the scrutiny of the feminine and effeminate bodies. The censorship of homosexuality and transgenderism in *lakorn* manifests in the normalization and marginalization of queer bodies. The censorship of feminine desires and sexual freedom in *lakorn* manifests in the re-subjugation of female bodies under overarching cultural and religious paradigms. Censorship is the maintenance of a gendered status quo. The implications of this status quo is conveyed by the following caricature of the trendiness of rape in *lakorn*:

[The main male lead] is so angry and frustrated with the woman he wrongly takes to be "bad" and so rapes her in order to "punish" her. Only when he finds out that the victim is actually

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<sup>155</sup> Van Esterik, 49-50.

<sup>156</sup> Chalidaporn Songsamphan, "Localizing Feminism: Women's Voices and Social Activism in Thai Context," *Gunda Werner Institute*, March, 9, 2011, accessed April 1, 2014 <<http://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2011/03/09/localizing-feminism-women%E2%80%99s-voices-and-social-activism-thai-context>>.

good and innocent (a virgin, too) does he fall in love with her and tries to win her heart through many travails. It's also typical that the female loves him back, disregarding the man's anger management problem. Then it's a happy ending.<sup>157</sup>

While the *lakorn* draws in a majority female audience, the *lakorn* world view is not envisioned in their favor. Instead, the world of the *lakorn* is a young and successful straight man's world. Thus, like with the American soap opera, a feminist or critical reading of the Thai *lakorn* also has to recognize the gendered nature of television media and the problematic figure of the woman within the soap genre in order to further problematize issues of female and queer subjectivity, representation, and agency.

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<sup>157</sup> Ploenpote Atthakor, "Condoning rape in Thai TV drama," *Bangkok Post*, January 23, 2008.

## Chapter 4

### Exposing the Defects: Political Sentiments and Sensibilities under Surveillance

As the previous chapter has shown, a variety of actors are intentionally and unintentionally embroiled in the act of censorship. When called upon to intervene, state censorship officials deliberate each case individually and deploy various tactics to resolve the conflict at hand. Most soaps easily make it past all three levels of censorship. Those that push the boundaries possibly subject themselves to a higher content rating and forced edits. Viewers are familiar with this pattern despite its elusiveness. An incident in early 2013 however changed *lakorn* censorship in a way that few had anticipated. The sudden banning of *Nuer Mek 2* (เหนือเมฆ 2: มือปราบขมังเวทย์ – Ch.3, 2012) made headline news in Thailand. The fact that the whole affair was shrouded in secrecy added to the controversy. The *lakorn* might have violated Section 37 of the 2008 Radio and Television Broadcasting Business Act which prohibits content that seeks to overthrow the constitutional monarchy, threatens national security or morality, constitutes obscenity or harms people's mental or physical health.<sup>158</sup> *Nuer Mek 2* thus became a test case for the limits of voicing political discontent. The ban prompted Vasiit Dejkunjorn to personally pen a bitter letter posted on *Matichon*, where he was the Vice President of the Board of Advisors at the time. He wrote in a sarcastic tone that he has read the aforementioned legal code and did not see how the violation took place no matter how many times he read it.<sup>159</sup> Vasiit Dejkunjorn is the most well-known example of this type of reaction by viewers to the incident: anger, confusion, and disappointment.

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<sup>158</sup> Radio and Broadcasting Business Act B.E. 2551 (2008), Section 37.

<sup>159</sup> Vasiit Dejkunjorn, "Mua kon duu thuk bangkhap May hai duu lakorn toratat [When viewers are prohibited from watching television drama]," *Matichon Online*, January 8, 2013, accessed October 20, 2014 <[http://www.matichon.co.th/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1357615175&grpId=03&catid=03](http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1357615175&grpId=03&catid=03)>.

*Nuer Mek 2* is distinguished for registering the sternest measure of censorship. It is also notable due to the scapegoating and lack of transparency that have worked to cover the truth behind the ban to this very day. That is not to say that *Nuer Mek 2* pioneered a new form of the *lakorn* genre. It too adopted the general formulaic layout: the courtship between the *pra'ek-nang'ek* pairing, immoral villains stirring up trouble, and plenty of misunderstandings and deceit. The missing piece was an uplifting finale. The plotline was heavily premised on the juxtaposition of good and evil. The difference this time was that both the good and the evil were being embodied by Thai politicians. Like the figure of the female flight attendant, the cunning mistress, the Muslim woman, the figure of the Thai politician comes with a problematic set of expectations. Unlike the cases in Chapter 3 in which the catalyst for censorship was the supposed inaccuracies and exaggerations of the fictional world of a Thai soap opera, *Neur Mek 2* was precariously living at the edge. Despite its themes of sorcery, it was on the verge of being too realistic. The ban of *Nuer Mek 2* for its suggestive commentary on Thai politics was the most conspicuous but not the first. This chapter presents a very short list of *lakorn* censored for their perceived references to actual political scenarios and persons. Simply put, the drama was getting too close to reality.

Undoubtedly, Thai politics have evolved tremendously in the past several decades. The country transitioned from an authoritarian regime in the early 1970s to civilian democracy in the 1990s. Along the way, Thailand witnessed military dictatorship, state authoritarianism, communist “insurgency”, the aftermath of the Cold War, but also the Thai economic boom, the rise of the middle class and the empowerment of civil society.<sup>160</sup> But certain defects in the system manage to withstand political change, manifesting themselves once in a while within the political *lakorn*. In

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<sup>160</sup> Peter Jackson, “Offending Images: Gender and Sexual Minorities, and State Control of the Media in Thailand,” in *Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, ed. Russell H.K. Heng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 2000), 201.

this chapter, I present cases in which *lakorn* were censored for their check on political authority and critique of the Thai government. Censorship is supposed to act as a security barricade that purges whatever threatens the political configuration and state legitimacy. This chapter points out that censorship, on the contrary, calls even more attention to the defects. Channel 3 claimed that the motive behind the ban of *Nuer Mek 2* was to elude public criticism and political controversy. Instead, their act of self-censorship detonated a surge of controversy and conspiracy onto the interface. For better or for worse, the spotlight on the shortcomings of the Thai political system in *lakorn* arouse public sentiments about justice, authority, power, corruption, and the institution of law. The censor interface for the political *lakorn* simultaneously tests politics' sensitivities and spectators' sensibilities.

### **Authority in Check**

*Sarawat Yai* (สารวัตรใหญ่) was the first *lakorn* targeted for its politicized content. It was originally a serial novel written by Vasit Dejkunjorn (พล.ต.อ.วชิษฐ เดชกุญชร), a former police officer and author of the *Nuer Mek 2* letter almost 20 years later. The story was first published in *Matichon Weekly Magazine* from October 1989 to October 1991.<sup>161</sup> The novel was made into a *lakorn* that aired on Channel 7 in 1994. *Sarawat Yai* was vastly popular with Thai audiences for its depiction of the amicable and diligent Police Chief Yai Waeroj (พ.ต.ต.ใหญ่ เวโรจน์). Yai is a border patrol policeman (ตำรวจตระเวนชายแดน/ตชด.) who is reassigned to the position of Chief of Police at Pra Lan. He is uncertain about his abilities since he only has experience suppressing terrorists. Upon his arrival at his new station, he discovers that the area under his jurisdiction is dirty and crime-ridden. There is widespread corruption and the policemen are blatantly disregarding their duties. With his idealism still intact, Yai proceeds to lead by example by

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<sup>161</sup> "Sarawat Yai [Chief of Police Yai]," *Khaosod*, April 29, 2010, accessed March 10, 2014  
<[http://www.khaosod.co.th/view\\_news.php?newsid=TUROamIyd3hOVEk1TURRMU13PT0=>](http://www.khaosod.co.th/view_news.php?newsid=TUROamIyd3hOVEk1TURRMU13PT0=>).

aggressively fighting the criminals and corrupt policemen roaming the city in order to bring peace to Pra Lan.<sup>162</sup> *Sarawat Yai* is a story of a figure of authority gallantly standing up for justice. *Sarawat Yai* is equally a story of the state of injustice and criminality perpetuated by police indolence and incompetence. In this respect, the police is both the menace and savior of the city.



Illustration 4.1: Promotional poster for *Sarawat Yai* starring Likit Eakmongkol as Yai

This imaging of policemen in the drama sparked a debate between the broadcaster and law enforcement officers. Vigorous criticism of *Sarawat Yai* rested on its explicit and candid portrayal of the police. Accusations were launched that the *lakorn* was disrespecting and destroying the image of the Thai police force. Protests from police officers forced Channel 7 to hastily end the broadcast after only four episodes despite its high viewership.<sup>163</sup> The abrupt and indefinite cancellation of the show was never explained by the Royal Thai Army who owned Channel 7.

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<sup>162</sup> “Sarawat Yai [Chief of Police Yai],” *ThailandLakorn*, accessed March 10, 2014 <[thailandlakorn.com/สารวัตรใหญ่](http://thailandlakorn.com/สารวัตรใหญ่)>.

<sup>163</sup> “Yon Roy...Lakorn-Phapayon ruang thii don baen korn Nuer Mek 2 [Drama-film stories that were banned before Nuer Mek 2],” *Kapook!* accessed March 15, 2014 <<http://drama.kapook.com/view53964.html>>; Sara Van Fleet, “Everyday Dramas; Television and Modern Thai Women” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1998), 34.

Police intervention left this case unresolved for viewers who could not watch the *lakorn* until completion. Rumors in the press painted this arbitrary termination of a new TV drama as the result of anger and disapproval from government officials to General Vasi's portrayal of the alliance and collusion between the police, the mafia, local politicians and village leaders.<sup>164</sup> The termination of *Sarawat Yai* was a retort by the police to an instance in which its authority was being questioned. While Police Chief Yai is a heroic character determined to cleanse his city of crime and corruption, he must contend with the presence of inept, idle and disreputable officers. This plotline unsettles the notion that the principle mandate of the police is to protect the interests and welfare of the citizens. Censorship emerges as a mechanism to defend if not avow the ideal image of police authority and aptitude. While the television censorship board under the Broadcasting Directing Board was abolished after the May 1992 crisis, *Sarawat Yai* illustrates how government threats and pressures were still prevalent in the workings of the industry.

Channel 7 commissioned another contentious drama following the life of a police officer over a decade later. Unfortunately, it never saw the light of day. Back in 2005, Channel 7 purchased the copyrights for *Tah Du Dao, Thaw Tit Din* (ตาดูดาวเท้าติดดิน, Eyes to the Stars, Feet on the Ground) from the author, Walaya, and commissioned DaraVDO to turn the book into the channel's first political and biographical *lakorn*. Based on the real life of Thaksin Shinawatra, the *lakorn* follows his years in the police force and his courtship and marriage to his wife Potjaman before the start of his political career. Since there was a proliferation of publications about his life and ideologies at the time, Channel 7 intended on catching the "Thaksin tide" (กระแสทักษิณ).<sup>165</sup> The

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<sup>164</sup> Van Fleet, 34.

<sup>165</sup> "'Tah Du Dao Thaw Tit Din' lakorn thuk thing? ['Eyes to the Stars, Feet on the Ground' - the drama that was thrown away?]," *Komchadluek*. January 9, 2013, accessed March 15, 2014  
<[http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20130109/148978/ตาดูดาวเท้าติดดินละครถูกทิ้ง.html#.Uy0FwZjD\\_4g](http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20130109/148978/ตาดูดาวเท้าติดดินละครถูกทิ้ง.html#.Uy0FwZjD_4g)>.

production was completed in that very year despite allegations of being a propaganda scheme in favor of Thaksin, who had just entered his second term as Prime Minister at the time.



Illustration 4.2: Promotional poster for *Tah Du Dao, Thaw Tit Din* which stars Paul Pattapol Silapajarn as Thaksin Shinawatra and Jui Warattaya Nilkuha as Potjama

The Thaksin tide, however, was on the wane. Channel 7 was growing wary of the large, sporadic protests by Muangthai Rai Sabdah (เมืองไทยรายสัปดาห์), the predecessor to the People's Alliance for Democracy, as the airdate was quickly approaching. With the looming protests against Thaksin's reelection, the channel was obliged to cancel the broadcast indefinitely.<sup>166</sup> Rumors that all the tapes were destroyed instead of stored for future broadcast suggests the gravity of the situation.<sup>167</sup> Political pressures influenced this act of self-censorship by Channel 7. Like with the figure of the police, the image and reputation of Thaksin as a figure of great influence and authority was being reexamined in a public manner. Amidst the political disorder and friction following the 2005 general elections, the airing of a *lakorn* about the very person at the center of the conflict

<sup>166</sup> "Pluk pii lakorn 'Tah Du Dao Thaw Tit Din' wep Pantip plom phang 7 sii puan [Conjuring drama 'Tah Du Dao Thaw Tit Din' Pantip fakes announcement on Channel 7 to create misunderstanding]," *ASTV Manager*, August 26, 2013, accessed March 10, 2014 <<http://www.manager.co.th/Drama/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9560000106796>>. The book - Walaya (Phumtham Vetchayachai), *Thaksin Shinawatra: Tah Du Dao, Thaw Tit Din* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1999).

<sup>167</sup> "Jui pat top khaay lakorn tham lai taep lakorn tah du dao [Jui wards off answering whether or not lakorn producers have destroyed the tapes of the drama *Eyes to the Stars*]," *Thairath*, April 27, 2010, accessed March 15, 2014 <<http://www.thairath.co.th/content/ent/79453>>.



would surely have many detrimental implications for the channel such as being accused of political favoritism and inflaming the viewers' violent urges. The subsequent political turmoil that eventually led up to the 2006 coup is indicative of the aptness of Channel 7's judgment call.

### **Above the Clouds**

Since *Sarawat Yai*, there have been numerous *lakorn* about the law enforcement officers, most depicting the police force in a positive light. From March 16 to May 4, 2010, Channel 3 aired a *lakorn* dealing with Thai police and politics until completion without much incident. While still adhering to the typical melodramatic plot structure, *Nuer Mek* (เหนือเมฆ), an action-suspense drama, explored issues of corruption and cronyism without much subtlety. The plotline follows the *pra'ek*, Payu, in his desperate attempt to exonerate himself from a variety of false accusations including murder. As he uncovers the truth, Payu encounters government secrets and cover-ups that threaten to unravel the entire system and put many other lives at risk. At heart, *Nuer Mek* is another story of good versus evil. It is about political honesty under attack by the perils of rampant corruption. It dares to portray the dark side of the deep-seated alliance between business and politics in Thailand. Some scenes explicitly depict the outright violence and brutality involved in the fight for wealth and power among elite groups in the country.

Payu is the only child of Meka, a respected, noble politician who raised his son since the death of his wife years ago. The father and son have an amicable relationship. Meka is dating Napa, the headstrong and self-confident captain of the Special Investigation Unit (TSI) in the police force. Napa has a strained relationship with her daughter Fah who works as a computer programmer. While Fah resents her mother for being a workaholic, she frequently hacks government portals in secret to assist Napa in her detective work. Both Payu and Fah are framed for horrible crimes at the same time. At his own graduation party, Payu wakes up after being

drugged with a gun in his hands surrounded by the dead bodies of all his friends in attendance. Fah is caught hacking and accused of selling hard drugs to minors. While both are innocent, the evidence is clearly stacked against them. When they seek help from their parents, both Meka and Napa refuse to come to their aid since they are constrained by their position of authority. On their way to prison, Payu and Fah successfully escape a hired gunman sent to kill them. Believing that their cases are linked, they cooperate to search for the true culprits. They find themselves as fugitives from the law and a mysterious force determined to extinguish them at every turn. They eventually discover that they are being hunted by a clandestine pseudo-governmental group called the “Organization” (องค์กร). The Organization is headed by four influential individuals working in the shadows to gain control over the economic and political affairs of the country.<sup>168</sup>



Illustration 4.3: Promotional poster for *Nuer Mek* starring Chakrit Yamnarm as Payu and as Cherry Kemapsorn Sirisukha as Fah, Nok Sinjai Plengpanich as Napa and as Too Noppon Gomarachun as Meka (Mekin)

These four members of the Organization capitalize on their business networks to engineer their rise to the top of the power hierarchy in Thailand. In their quest to expose this group, Payu

<sup>168</sup> “Lakorn Nuer Mek [Drama Above the Clouds],” *THAITV3*, accessed February 15, 2014 <<http://www.thaitv3.com/เรื่องย่อละคร/81/เหนือเมฆ.html>>.

and Fah are portrayed as vigilant defenders of free will, justice and democracy under threat. In a pivotal scene, Payu makes an announcement broadcasted across the capital city to express his infuriation with what he sees as a failed system of law and justice:

“Hello, Thai society that is asleep. I believe that everyone knows my face well. I am Payu Tanarath, the accused who is wanted by the state on various charges. I have come here today because I wanted to say that it is time for Thai society to wake up. Doesn’t everybody know that the chaotic conditions of our country’s economy and society are spun by a single group? It is the same group that created the situation to make me a criminal in the eyes of society. I had to escape from the crime that I did not commit. But the more I escape, the more I know that I will die as a victim. Many innocent people are forced to kill me. They have to die because of the evilness of these three people. Therefore, I have had enough with needing to escape frantically. From today on, I will not escape anymore. I will rise to fight against them. I will tear off their masks so that society will know the truth in order to prove my own innocence. And to those three people, guard yourself well. Your karma is following you to hunt you down. No matter what, you do not have a way to escape from your guilt. It’s your turn to face your karma.”<sup>169</sup>



Illustration 4.4: Left - The members of The Organization; Right - Payu makes a citywide broadcast announcing his retaliation against The Organization

Payu is the whistleblower for the unlawful workings of a megalomaniac group primed to govern the affairs of the country without the citizens’ knowledge and consent. The Organization includes: Orn In, the director of a national satellite communications company called the Network to spy on the activities of TSI, Aisoon, a political businessman and arms dealers and Tawan,

<sup>169</sup> *Nuer Mek*, Episode 11 (My translation).

founder of a charitable foundation that secretly kidnaps underprivileged children to generate good publicity for his business projects. In the last few episodes, viewers shockingly discover the identity of the fourth member of the Organization – Mekin, Meka’s older twin brother, a drug addict and felon recruited to disguise himself as Meka. The term *nuer mek* has a negative meaning in the *lakorn*. It literally translates as above the clouds in the sense of positioning or believing oneself to be above the law. *Nuer Mek* underlines business brokering and political treason as deterrents of “true” democracy in Thailand. The institution of law is deficient and susceptible to exploitation. In spite of that, good can still prevail as long as there is political accountability from legitimate forces of authority. The drama ends with the capture of the original three members of the Organization and the death of Mekin by competent police authorities to restore peace and stability to Thailand under a steadfast leader. This neat conclusion spells out a clear message: evilness cannot exist above the clouds forever because goodness will eventually win out. *Nuer Mek* was a successful drama that wrestled with issues of political legitimacy and transparency within the soap genre. Despite its political aims, the soap failed to a reactionary movement from the viewers. It was able to evade the censors.

### **V for Vendetta**

Channel 3 took another chance with its venture into political drama more than two years later with *Nuer Mek 2: Meu Phrap Jom Khamang Waet* (เหนือเมฆ2: มือปราบจอมขมังเวทย์) directed by Nonzee Nimibutr, a film director best known for *Nang Nak* (นางนาก, 1999). The inclusion of *sorcerer* (ขมังเวทย์) in the title's subheading indicates that the second installment will integrate elements of black magic and wizardry which seemingly suggests its triviality if not political neutrality. Set four years after the end of *Nuer Mek*, the sequel details the tribulations of Meka as the elected Prime Minister against a threatening coalition backed by political power, dirty money

and incantations. Meka is assisted this time by earnest police lieutenant Sengkla, his eccentric partner Major Saming, his childhood friend Namsai who is a reporter for SkyNews and Dr. Praepailin of the Institute of Forensic Tech. Sengkla and Saming are tasked with recovering the four divine weapons believed to give great powers to the one who possesses them all. Their investigation is repeatedly hindered by an unidentified cloaked figure whose supernatural abilities include dodging bullets, mind control and shape-shifting. As Sengkla and Praepailin try to explain the mysterious occurrences through scientific evidence, Saming relies on his knowledge about omens, spells, and charms to find who is behind the thefts of the weapons.<sup>170</sup> If this was the entire synopsis of the drama, it would have flown under the censor radar. The premise of *Nuer Mek 2* remained the same as its predecessor – good versus evil. But this time, the stakes were raised.



Illustration 4.5: Promotional poster for *Nuer Mek 2* starring Mark Prin Suparat as Sengkla and Mint Chalida Vijitvongtong as Praepailin

Meka is positioned at the front lines of an internal political war. The evil side is manned by Jak, Special Advisor to the Thaiteewat Party, his hired hand, Winyu and an insider, Rawee, who is the director of the Special Investigation Unit. Jak holds a personal vendetta against Meka

<sup>170</sup> Lakorn Nuer Mek 2: Meu Phrap Jom Khamang Waet [Above the Clouds 2: the Conqueror over the Master of Sorcery],” *THAITV3*, accessed February 15, 2014  
<<http://www.thaitv3.com/ละคร/199/เหนือเมฆ2-มือปราบจอมเวทย์.html#ad-image-0>>.

whose upright character is a hindrance to his elaborate operation of corruption. When Meka refuses to comply, Jak calls on Winyu, a potent sorcerer, to do his bidding. Winyu plots the murder of then Deputy Prime Minister Anon. Afterwards, he possesses the minds of high-ranking ministry officials to unanimously vote in Jak as the replacement. Once in an advantageous position, Jak abuses his powers to push for an auction to acquire new government satellites. The project is framed as an investment in the future of the country that would reap benefits for all Thai citizens. But the dirty politics is happening on the side. The company locked to win the bid to be the recipient contractor, Diamond Karat Network, is selected by Jak himself. In the Council of Ministers meeting, Winyu attempts to possess Meka into passing the resolution. Protected from black magic by his strong virtue, Meka is unaffected and instead calls for a referendum from the people. Meanwhile, Napa is praying at a temple asking that virtue remain a sanctuary and protective armor for those who intend to help the country and for wickedness to lose out.<sup>171</sup> The demarcation between good and evil is now being drawn *within* government. The character of Meka is no longer fighting just with business-minded criminals, but his own kind.



Illustration 4.6: With possession of two of the divine weapons, Winyu (played by Nok Chatchai Plengpanich) uses black magic in an attempt to control Meka into approving the satellite project. He fails because Meka is protected by a strong, virtuous inner spirit (Episode 6).

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<sup>171</sup> *Nuer Mek 2*, Episode 6 (2012).



When black magic fails, Jak resorts to assassination. Meka and Napa are gunned down at their home but manage to survive the shooting. While rushing to safety, they run into Komsorn, Secretary of the Prime Minister, who has come to kill Meka while under the control of Winyu. Meka is shot in the chest by Komsorn and falls into a state of coma. Jak visits the hospital to confirm Meka's paralysis and rejoices in his defeat of his strongest political enemy. He now has the right to act on behalf of the Prime Minister. In a press conference following the news of Meka's critical condition, Jak is bombarded with questions concerning his appointment of Winyu as secretary and his annulment of the referendum for the satellite project. He is accused of cronyism (พวกพ้อง), conflict of interests (ขัดผลประโยชน์), and abuses of power for his ties to Diamond Karat Network and other corporations whose successful bid on several government projects were under his stamp of approval. The villain of the story, is painted as a corrupt, greedy politician who sees the game of politics solely as a lucrative business transaction. *Nuer Mek 2* bluntly dramatizes the myriad illegal maneuverings and machinations involved within Thai politics.



Illustration 4.7: Left – A bitter argument between Meka and Jak over the nature of Thai politics (Episode 1); Right – Press conference where Jak (played by Dom Haetrakul) denies charges of corruption (Episode 6)

## Guessing Game

It is hard to miss the satirical tone of *Nuer Mek 2*. Satire is generally defined as the employment of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness. The purpose of satire, in its stress on prevailing vices and follies of a particular person or class of people, is to ridicule.<sup>172</sup> Satire “chips at society’s preferred frame and exposes the hypocrisy and inequality its master narratives work to conceal.” It gives credence to an unorthodox view inviting individuals to reappraise normative experience and question the foundations of society’s dominant stories.<sup>173</sup> Satire aims to summon its audiences to actively scrutinize the ruptures and distortions of lived experience. What exactly was *Nuer Mek 2* trying to say about the existing conditions of Thai society?

*Nuer Mek 2* depicts the game of politics in Thailand as wrought with discord and vice. The heroization of Meka and villianization of Jak is posited on a politicized discursive taxonomy that differentiate their actions and principles. In their many quarrels, Meka and Jak express their adherence to mutually exclusive political ideologies. Their rivalry is evident from their first encounter in the premiere episode. Jak confronts Meka to pressure him into approving a nuclear power project. He reminds Meka that the Thaiteewat Party was financially backed with the money from his business connections. By extension, Meka's political rise was possible because of the support of the business sector. Meka clarifies that his appointment as Prime Minister was based on the votes of the citizens; therefore he must honorably carry out his duties to ensure their wellbeing. While the world of politics may change with time, Meka insists on the stability of the "world of righteousness" in which power should be used to create justice, morality and virtue. In

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<sup>172</sup> “Satire,” (def. 1a) *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford English Dictionary, Dec 2013, accessed March 23, 2014 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171207?rskey=Y88bnP&result=1#eid>>.

<sup>173</sup> Megan Hill, “Developing a Normative Approach to Political Satire: A Critical Perspective,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 328-330.



his poorly veiled acts of corruption, the character of Jak epitomizes the figure of the crooked politician set on profiting from his position. In his defense of the people's voices, the character of Meka exemplifies the figure of the scrupulous, self-sacrificing and resolute politician who prioritizes national prosperity and popular demands. The two men's war of words decisively establishes the *lakorn's* political turn from the start. Their politicized rhetoric exposes the potential faults within an unchecked Thai political system: the pull of party ideology, the influence of money and business, and the growing manipulation of the political network.

On his Facebook page, Thaksin's son, Panthongtae described the drama as a thinly veiled attack on his family.<sup>174</sup> For many, *Nuer Mek 2* was indeed mocking Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies through the character of Jak, an egotistical politician who used money to buy his way into politics. Jak abuses his position in political office to implement an elaborate plan to make enormous profits by manipulating the allocation of government concessions in favor of his private business interests. He and his affiliates spearhead a lucrative government satellite project solely for their personal economic benefit. Perhaps it is coincidental that the formation of the Thai Rak Thai party was funded by Thaksin and his business associates and that Thaksin specialized in selling Shinawatra group's satellites through deals with government agencies.<sup>175</sup> The producers could not directly state that *Nuer Mek 2* was a satirical piece about Thaksin. But the plotline encouraged viewers to participate in this easy guessing game.

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<sup>174</sup> "Thailand: Thai soap opera turned into political theatrics," *Thai News Service*, January 10, 2013.

The film *Shakespeare Must Die* (2012) follows "a theatre group in a fictional country resembling Thailand that is staging a production of Macbeth, in which an ambitious general murders his way to the Scottish throne." The character named Dear Leader is a dictator who bears a resemblance to former Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra. The film was banned by the censorship board for its anti-monarchical overtones and charged political content that might incite rebellious passions.; "Thailand bans Macbeth film Shakespeare Must Die," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2012, Accessed March 1, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/04/thailand-bans-macbeth-film>>.

<sup>175</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2009) 210-212; Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Singapore: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2005), 212-214.

Thaksin wanted to replace “money politics” with “big money politics” by building a “new political structure in which power is centralized in a political party financed by big business.”<sup>176</sup> His political network was forged with large conglomerates, political parties, the National Assembly, the military and the police, all intricately linked to him and his family. The influence and profitability of his network eclipsed that of previous linkages between different sources of economic and political power.<sup>177</sup> How is this translated in the *lakorn*? *Nuer Mek 2* does not endeavor to say that corruption and the presence of business are new additions to Thai politics, but rather they have taken new forms. Corruption is no longer conducted through small bribes and loose agreements between bureaucracy, businessmen and local politicians. As implied by the term *nuer mek*, the corruption shown in the *lakorn* has grown into an extremely sophisticated venture scheme that is impressive in reach and scale. Ultimately, the *lakorn* insinuates that immorality is accentuated in the current phrase of Thai politics since the system is now alarmingly contaminated by a formidable network of greedy corporate poachers. Whether or not this is a satirical interpretation of Thaksin’s coupling of power, big business and politics is for viewers to decide.

### **Domino Effect**

*Nuer Mek 2* debuted on December 4, 2013 and aired nine out of its twelve episodes from Friday to Sunday for three weeks. *Nuer Mek 2* appeared at that moment to draw no substantial public reaction. On the last week of its broadcast, however, Channel 3 posted a cancellation announcement which would soon ignite a huge firestorm in news media, social media, and even the streets. News of the abrupt axing circulated immediately and so rapidly to the extent that the commotion around the ban exceeded the attention paid to the drama before its termination. The incident was similar to the case of *Sarawat Yai* in that the *lakorn* focuses on the character of Meka

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<sup>176</sup> Pasuk and Baker, 195-196.

<sup>177</sup> McCargo and Ukrist, 212-214.

as the honest and revered Prime Minister struggling to rid the Thai government of corrupt politicians who are out to exploit the citizens for their own gain. Nonetheless, there was no sense of criticism leveled at the *lakorn* prior to the decision, making its cancellation seem unwarranted to viewers. Ironically, it was the unexpected ban that was met with great disapproval by the vast public reaction. The aftermath of the ban was ultimately more political than the *lakorn* itself.

The loaded timeline of the *Nuer Mek 2* incident starts a few days before the now infamous Channel 3 announcement. The channel was apparently rushing to edit the remaining three episodes into one final episode to be aired that upcoming Friday. Instead, the channel chose to scrap the entire finale just a few hours before its scheduled airtime.<sup>178</sup> On Friday, January 4, 2013 at 6:30pm, the channel aired a message apologizing for their decision to terminate the airing of *Nuer Mek 2* for its inappropriate content. The first episode of *Raeng Prathana* (เรงปรารถนา - Ch.3, 2013) was aired at 8:15pm instead of the tenth episode of *Nuer Mek 2*. Mark Prin, the actor playing Sengkla, post a snapshot on Instagram at 9:20pm that with the simple message: It's okay (ไม่เป็นไร). Nok Sinjai, the actress playing Napa, followed with an Instagram post of a single white flower blooming under the cloudy blue sky with a statement: What happened is not important. What is important is what you think about the things that have happened.<sup>179</sup> Their vague posts suggest that they were sadden by the decision but have accepted it for now.

The haste of the ban worked to foster suspicions about government interference. The turn of events that quickly followed amassed to a scramble by many state actors to deny involvement. Suranand Vejjajiva, the Prime Minister's secretary-general insisted that the prime minister had nothing to do with this. The Prime Minister's Office Minister, Varathep Ratanakorn, who oversaw

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<sup>178</sup> "Politically tinged drama taken off air," *Bangkok Post*, January 4, 2013.

<sup>179</sup> "Chong 3 aang 'Nuer Mek 2' Nua haa bang ton may mo ock aakaat [Channel 3 claims that some contents of 'Nuer Mek 2' is not appropriate for airing]," *Thairath*, January 4, 2013, accessed February 20, 2014  
<<http://www.thairath.co.th/content/ent/317914>>.

Channel 3's concession, confirmed that there had been no order from the government to end the show.<sup>180</sup> Pheu Thai Party deputy spokeswoman, Sunisa Lertpakawat, confirmed that the government had not intervened in any way and refuted any possibility of an order from an exiled ex-prime minister Thaksin. Peerapong Manakit, chairman of NBTC's subcommittee in charge of content and program slots, claimed that he was informed by unnamed Channel 3 executives that they were concerned that the *lakorn* might violate Article 37 of the 2008 Radio and Television Broadcasting Business Act. He concluded that the scrapping of the soap opera was solely an act of self-censorship by the station.<sup>181</sup> Channel 3 executives were apprehensive that the political overtones of the *lakorn* would infringe on broadcasting law. But the ambiguity of their explanation had triggered a domino effect of denial and responsibility dodging within mere days.

The hype behind the ban implicated the NBTC in the process. With speculations about the hidden agendas of the government in the decision by the channel, the opposition jumped at this opening to prolong the criticism hurled at the administration. Chavanond Intarakomalyasut of the Democrat Party pushed for an investigation into the cancellation believing that there was surely political interference since the *lakorn* included themes of corruption.<sup>182</sup> Mallika Boonmeetrakul, a deputy spokesperson for the party, urged the NBTC to examine the last three episodes to clarify whether or not certain content really did violate the 2008 Broadcasting Business Act.<sup>183</sup> Their call for further investigation spun the termination of the *lakorn* into a sign of the government's "invisible hand." Then the Thai Constitution Protection Association petitioned the NBTC and the Customer Protection Board to force Channel 3 to air the remaining episodes. Srisuwan Janya, secretary-general of the association, believed that the termination of the show infringed on the

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<sup>180</sup> "Govt denies pulling controversial TV show," *The Nation*, January 5, 2013.

<sup>181</sup> "Soap opera axing sparks political firestorm," *Bangkok Post*, January 6, 2013.

<sup>182</sup> "Political fracas after Thai soap axed," *AFP*, January 6, 2013.

<sup>183</sup> "Ire over axing of Nuer Mek 2 continues," *Bangkok Post*, January 6, 2013.

rights of Thai consumers. If these agencies did not facilitate in meeting their demands within a week, the association planned to lodge a complaint to the Central Administrative Court.<sup>184</sup> The situation had escalated into a complicated argument about freedom of speech, constitutional rights, and policy review. The foreclosing of a conclusion to the *lakorn* generated more of a reaction than its complete airing would have.

### **Fan Mayhem**

The veil of secrecy was immediately sensed and commented upon by the viewers as well. The instantaneous backlash on social media outlets commenced a divided but volatile state of online fan mayhem. The series' cancellation drew heavy criticism from many viewers who insisted that Channel 3 show the remaining episodes. Some even called for a boycott of the station. Over the course of that weekend, several Facebook pages sprung up from supporters of the show. The most outspoken page, the "Bring Me Back *Nuer Mek 2*" Facebook page, gained more than 47,000 followers within that timeframe.<sup>185</sup> On January 7, a group calling themselves Unlimited Hack Team managed to break into Channel 3's official website ([www.thaitv3.com](http://www.thaitv3.com)) and displayed a message on the front page for twenty minutes with a simple question, "Where is my *Nuer Mek*?"<sup>186</sup> The online reaction was taken to the streets when group of protesters wearing white masks gathered in front of Channel 3's headquarters on Rama IV Road to protest the decision.<sup>187</sup> While opinions were founded on more hearsay and guesswork than on evidence, they demonstrated the emerging

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<sup>184</sup> Thanyarat Doksone, "TV Cancellation Causes Uproar: Cancellation Of Mini-Series 'Nua Mek 2' In Thailand Sparks Outrage," *Associated Press*, January 7, 2013.

<sup>185</sup> *Associated Press*, January 7, 2013.

The "Bring Me Back *Nuer Mek 2*" Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/เอาเหนือเมฆ-2-กู้คืนมา/346010965505832>.

<sup>186</sup> "Meu dii haek wep chong 3 thuang 'Nuer Mek 2' daan khor ook [Skilled hands hacked the website of Channel 3 to demand (the airing of) 'Nuer Mek 2', (MC Dr. Churak) asked for them to go away]." *ASTV Manager*, January 7, 2013, accessed February 15, 2014 <<http://manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9560000002235>>.

<sup>187</sup> "'Sorayut' yom aan khaw 'Nuer Mek 2' lew lang chong 3 don buk prathuang ['Sorayut' agrees to read the news about 'Nuer Mek 2' after Channel 3 was raided by protesters]," *ASTVผู้จัดการ*, January 13, 2013, accessed February 15, 2014 <<http://manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9560000004752>>.

implications of television censorship in Thailand. Political criticism was no longer a campaign solely waged in academic institutions, courtrooms, and government offices. It was a public and publicized movement bolstered by new technologies of information sharing and discussion.



Illustration 4.8: Unlimited Hack Team displays message on main page of Channel 3's website

The urgency and necessity of this inspection into *Nuer Mek 2*'s cancellation reflected in the participation of a broad range of actors. Bangkok senator, Rosana Tositrakul, commented on her Facebook page that Channel 3 needed to issue a clear explanation for the rush for self-censorship since she thought the drama was constructive. Supinya Klangnarong, an NBTC commissioner, opined via Tweeter (@supinya) that she would table this as a "media freedom suppression" issue at the next NBTC meeting.<sup>188</sup> Parliamentary opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, took to the Twitter (@Abhisit\_DP) on January 5 to advise the broadcaster to reconsider. "I myself am not a drama viewer, but (the axing the series) is another infringement on people's rights and liberties. I have never seen a drama not finish airing," he tweeted.<sup>189</sup> With the influx of

<sup>188</sup> "'Concern over content' behind axing of drama," *The Nation*, January 6, 2013.

<sup>189</sup> Abhisit Vejjajiva (Abhisit\_DP), "I myself am not a drama viewer, but (the axing the series) is another infringement on people's rights and liberties. I have never seen a drama not finish airing." January 5, 2013, 3:47am. Tweet. ([https://twitter.com/Abhisit\\_DP/status/287525831213985792](https://twitter.com/Abhisit_DP/status/287525831213985792)).

accusations of political interference in the cryptic axing of the soap, the NBTC as the national regulator was obligated to hold an emergency meeting. At a public seminar held at Chulalongkorn University's Communication Arts Faculty on January 10, Supinya clarified her disagreement with the unnecessary citing of Article 37. She stated that the NBTC has never used the law to ban any media because an over-exercising of the law would create a climate of fear. Her proposal that Channel 3 send the remaining episodes to NBTC for review was received with much approval from the hundreds of media representatives, students and members of the public in attendance.<sup>190</sup> The proliferation of theories and commentaries about the situation boosted the axing of *Nuer Mek 2* as an internal decision by Channel 3 into a pressing political issue that demanded resolution.

The fateful meeting did eventually occur. On January 16, the director Nonzee Nimibutr, the producer Chatchai Plengpanich (who plays Winyu) and his wife, Sinjai Plengpanich (who plays Napa) reported to a joint meeting in front of the Commission for Political Development, media journalists and members of the public. They informed those present at the meeting that they had sent the entire script of the *lakorn* to the channel before filming. Their duty was finished once they sent in the finished episodes to the channel. Furthermore, they were also oblivious to the real cause behind the termination since they were simply informed of the results of the decision.<sup>191</sup> Somrak Narongvichai, a Channel 3 management executive, reminded the NBTC and the media in a later meeting on January 23 that the decision to ban the *lakorn* was within the rights of the station. The reason for the lack of a press conference or follow-up statement from the channel was because there was no need since the station was following normal protocols.<sup>192</sup> This anticlimactic end to

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<sup>190</sup> *Thai News Service*, January 10, 2013.

<sup>191</sup> "Thim ngan 'Nuer Mek 2' pat nua haa mung kratop kray mung naen kwaam dii-chua [The work team of 'Nuer Mek 2' denies that the content is aimed at attacking a person, it focuses on good versus evil]," *Thairath*, January 13, 2013, accessed February 20, 2014 <<http://www.thairath.co.th/content/pol/320594>>.

<sup>192</sup> "Chong 3 yan rai bay sang kaan muang baen 'Nuer Mek 2' [Channel 3 affirms that there was no political order to ban 'Nuer Mek 2']," *Thairath*, January 23, 2013, accessed February 20, 2014 <<http://www.thairath.co.th/content/pol/322056>>.

the *Nuer Mek 2* incident is as unsettled and ambivalent as its start. The strategy of denial and claiming or feigning ignorance by those involved in the production mirrors that of government officials. In barring content that unmask the blemishes within the Thai political system from airing, supposed self-censorship on the part of Channel 3 exposed the very fault lines that it wanted to obscure.



Illustration 4.9: Left - Chatchai (left), Sinjai (middle) and Nonzee (right) giving statements at a meeting to investigate the termination of *Nuer Mek 2*; Right – The NBTC meeting with Channel 3 executives in attendance to clarify their decision (from *Thairath*)

The *Nuer Mek 2* controversy illustrates how censorship can produce paradoxical and adverse effects. The ban of the drama by Channel 3 was an act of deterrence against the imminent political repercussions of government disapproval and sanctions if the content was aired and then deemed offensive. The scrapping of the *lakorn* instead politicizes the actions and motives of those charged or suspected of culpability. Censorship had ironically, or perhaps strategically, transformed the *lakorn* into a viable medium for both engendering political progress and intensifying political fraction. An act of censorship is no longer a series of command and orders carried out by state agencies. It is a fluctuating and asymmetrical configuration of business interests, political stakes and public demands. A meeting of the minds occurs at the censor interface, one in which the parameters and dimensions of this configuration are hashed out.



## Conclusion: Making Conclusions

The familiar world of soap opera has been traditionally grounded on the naturalization of a repertoire of moral values depicted as underpinning social order. Soaps are narratives of the “moral occult” in that they create a world in which the “unthinking decision, the chance encounter, the accidental occurrence, and the meaningless tragedy all seem connected to some deeper but obscure pattern of significance, some hidden moral order.”<sup>193</sup> The closed serial soap postpones giving out any answers until the end when the resolution brings into view the outline of the operative moral or ideological universe. The attenuation of the narrative, its teleological thrust, and the privileging of closure invite the viewer to offer or detect a moral to the story.<sup>194</sup> The narrative build-up of the *lakorn* allows viewers to anticipate a grand ending in which loose ends are neatly tied up within a moral order. What happens when that grand ending is missing?

To this day, *Nuer Mek 2* never reached a proper conclusion. Did the last three episodes incite rebellion? If so, is that even important? The script of these episodes are posted online for anybody to read. They are littered with mentions about goodness (ความดี) and faith (ศรัทธา):

“Faith is what we call the belief in doing good (deeds). Let us just have the faith to fight for justice and righteousness. Goodness will never be extinct. Good people will never disappear from society.”

“The concept of faith is cultivated from generation to generation. The values of doing good for society must live forever...[Faith will] sustain goodness in society and protect good people from the evil doers increasing day by day. The law cannot punish them.”

“[People should] stop respecting those with position and rank, but give importance to goodness.”

“We are starting the final war with them. I will prove to those evil people that goodness will never die.”

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<sup>193</sup> Louise Spence, “‘They killed off Marlina, but she’s on another show now’: Fantasy, reality, and pleasure in watching daytime soap operas,” in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183.

<sup>194</sup> Robert Allen, “Introduction,” in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the world*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 23-24.

“The leader cannot just be a talented (skillful) person but must be a good person as well.”

"We all have to realize the value of life. A valuable life is not about dignity, reputation or money...but life that is sacrificed to benefit the society and the people around you."

“No one can escape death. Good people can die but the most important point is that our deaths will leave something behind for society.”

“Our nation will live on not because of any one person but because of the faith of every person in society to not accept defeat from evil.”<sup>195</sup>

The political message from the dialogue is once again that good will always triumph over evil. Power should not lie in the hands of one person. Thai politics should not be entrusted with those whose influence and authority are built on money and deception. Those with true virtue will bring morality back to the country by reestablishing a Thai society built on good faith and good deeds. The ending is a call for conscious, able-minded individuals to fight against the injustice and inequality within a Thai political system tainted by the privileging of material wealth and social standing.<sup>196</sup> This is the moral resolution intended for Thai audiences to grasp.

When news of the ban hit the Thai online world, there were rampant speculations that it was a thoroughly planned maneuver by key persons responsible for the conception and creation of the soap. The prequel was only a moderate success in ratings. Its themes of corporate greed and political power-mongering did not produce a reactionary impulse with Thai audiences to rectify such failings. *Nuer Mek 2* was also about to finish its run without too much fanfare, averaging

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<sup>195</sup> “Nuer Mek 2: Meu Praap Jom Khamang Wet [Above the Clouds 2: The Conqueror over the Master of Sorcery],” *Thairath*, February 23, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014 <<http://thairath.co.th/ent/novel/AboveTheClouds>>. Selected quotes from *Nuer Mek 2*, episode 10-12 (my translation).

<sup>196</sup> Summary of the last three episodes: While Meka is still in a comatose state, Winyu tries to gather all 4 divine weapons to cement his mystical powers. Major Saming figures out that Sengkla is the only one capable of stopping Winyu since he is a blood descendent of a disciple of this school of sorcery. With her mother captured, Praepailin is forced to steal the weapons from the authorities and hand them over to Winyu. Sengkla, Saming, and Napa chase their enemies to the storage warehouse where the weapons are stored. A final battle ensues between the two sides. Winyu reveals that he is Sengkla’s father! Sengkla defeats Winyu. Jak and Rawee are arrested. Komsorn becomes a rising young politician. Meka’s body is sent for cremation at the temple, but the ending leaves room for interpretation as to whether or not he is truly dead. Sengkla and Praepailin are reunited.

about nine in the ratings. The majority of the plotline that might have linked fictional characters to real people already aired in the first nine episodes. If one supposes that there was no political interference, why did Channel 3 ban the *lakorn* at this time? Netizens pointed at the personal history between the producer and senior actors of the *lakorn*. At the first annual Nataraja Awards in May 2010, Aof Pongpat (who plays Major Saming) accepted his award with a provocative speech declaring his utmost respect and loyalty to the King. His speech brought Chatchai Plengpanich (the producer of *Nuer Mek 2*) to tears. Before their group singing performance, he and two other actresses including Nok Sinjai (who plays Napa and is married to Chatchai in real life) pledged their allegiance to the King and urged the Thai people to stop fighting.<sup>197</sup> Their actions were in response to the ongoing protests and the violence of the military crackdown in Bangkok. Since these three people were coincidentally abroad at the start of *Nuer Mek 2* incident, their notable absence fuelled the rumors that the cancellation of *Nuer Mek 2* could very well be a deliberate attempt to stir up controversy to advance their pro-monarchical political stance.<sup>198</sup>

Writing in 1995, Nidhi Eoseewong believed that the success of Thai films at the time derived from their compliance with a traditional moral worldview. The moral world constructed in cinema was one in which society remains stationary and unchanged. People went to see films that they anticipate will not disrupt or transcend the boundaries of this ideal world.<sup>199</sup> But political satire is supposed to destabilize the ideal. It “unveils the ideal as fantasy created by the constraints

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<sup>197</sup> ““Dara chuen chom Aof Pongpat san sirasa nii mop hai prajao paen din [Admired star Aof Pongpat declares loyalty to the King],” *Sanook!*, May 17, 2010, accessed April 10, 2014

<<http://news.sanook.com/932823/ดาราชื่นชม%20ออฟ%20พงษ์พัฒน์%20สันติราษฎร์มอบให้พระเจ้าแผ่นดิน/>>.

<sup>198</sup> The producer and director of *Nuer Mek 2* have announced their plans to make *Nuer Mek 3* as a film to be released in a year or two. They say that the movie will include most of the main cast, but with an entirely different script. Since then, however, there has not been much news about the progress of the project; “‘Nok’ leng tham nang ‘Nuer Mek 3’ [Nok aims to make the film ‘Nuer Mek 3’],” *Komchadluek*, January 24, 2013, accessed March 1, 2014

<<http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20130124/150158/นกลิ่งทำหนังเหนือเมฆ3.html#.UQHBgWcWm18>>.

<sup>199</sup> Nidhi Eoseewong, “Kwaam lam luk khong ‘nam nao’ nay nang thai [The depth of “rotten waters” in Thai films],” *Silapawattthanataam* (1995): 53-54.

of a particular social system that inevitably marginalizes and debases certain voices by making them appear unintelligible against a backdrop of ‘normative reality.’” It seeks to shatter the complacency with the current system in an effort to create confusion, even if only momentarily. It tests people’s understandings of how the world operates by taunting and provoking them into doubt.<sup>200</sup> The satire of *Nuer Mek 2* aims to bring to the surface the flaws of the political system in place. Its challenge to the ideal moral world was evident in its political critique of a corrupt, elitist, and money-oriented government run by a few business-minded individuals holding command over a formidable political network. Its satire stimulates in its audiences a sense of doubt in the validity and legitimacy of the structures commanding their lives. The public outcry over the ban of *Nuer Mek 2* illustrates that spectators are ready and willing to be thrown into doubt. They no longer wish to be in a motionless moral world while society is being remade before their very eyes.

This chapter details the severest form of censorship – the ban. As a mechanism of censorship, the ban can occur before airtime (*Tah Du Dao*, *Thaw Tit Din*), almost immediately after the start of broadcast (*Sarawat Yai*), and even near the very end (*Nuer Mek 2*). This chapter introduces censorship as a strategy of evasion *and* creation of political controversy. This chapter also highlights the fact that no single party holds a monopoly over the right to construct and deconstruct the moral world of *lakorn*. The viewing publics of *lakorn* – both its producers and censors, fans and critics, its regular viewers and disinterested onlookers – have a say, role and motive in this world-making. Soap conventions say that the narrative trajectory of *lakorn* world-making must end with a moral message. But the success of *Nuer Mek 2* does not rely on narrative closure. It instead establishes a new possibility of political criticism in the (strategic) withholding of a moralistic resolution.

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<sup>200</sup> Hill, 331-332.

## *Conclusion*

### **Confronting the World of *Lakorn*: Lessons Learned and Dualities Tested**

#### **Project Findings**

In the introduction, I briefly answered three main questions: What is the *lakorn*? What are its role in Thai society? What constitutes state censorship? In this conclusion, I answer three more: What is the *lakorn* doing? What are its interventions into Thai society? What constitutes the state in censorship? The cases of *lakorn* censorship presented in this thesis provide rich material for investigation. My project confirms the need to study the “parts” of the censor interface free from preconceived binary and totalizing frameworks. As a soap opera, the *lakorn* is often branded as frivolous entertainment. In actuality, it can shape Thai society in profound ways. The notion that the state is a unified entity operating exclusively through the institution of law to discipline the population is also suspect. Finally, the spectators are no longer passive and private consumers, but also engaged in public debates.

Writing on the control technologies of mass media in the United States, Raiford Guins asks: Where precisely are “the censor,” the “institution of censorship,” and the “policy” in the practices of media regulation? This study of *lakorn* censorship started out with thinking through these same questions. Guins’ effort, however, is not to find the answers to these loaded questions but to challenge the very notion of censorship as the direct enforcement of policies of cultural regulation by a body of authority. Similar to Kuhn, he contends that media censorship in the U.S. for most of the twentieth century was “premised and practiced on the broadcast model of communications whereby censorship is said to emanate (down) from specific institutions and

governing organizations.”<sup>201</sup> *Lakorn* censorship can surely be examined with this broadcast model in mind. The results would be that state censorship does not exist. Censorship practices as extensions of official policy leave a paper trail. If one peruses the records of the NBTC, the state as an external censor almost never imposes a direct command on *lakorn*. My study of *lakorn* censorship does not aim to provide an institutional history of the NBTC. The censorship of *lakorn* that I detail leaves little or no trail. I argue instead that it resides in the mindsets, discourses and decisions of *lakorn* spectators – its creators, fans, critics, and casual viewers - who are in conversation with state policing bodies over issues of representation.

Guins argues that “the operations of censorial effects are manifest in new assemblages, technologies, practices and processes.” With the growth of new media and our social relations to them, censorship ceases to be exclusively the jurisdiction of an official or institute (*a censor*) as a repressive force or centralized entity. He suggests that “the censorial is a daily practice and technique of control not necessarily recognized and practiced as censorship.”<sup>202</sup> The purpose of the *lakorn* censorial is to covertly inculcate and ingrain into its recipients an aesthetic of meaning-making that aligns itself, for the most part, with state agenda. For many viewers, the *lakorn* censorial becomes a habitual but unconscious practice and technique of self-imposed control not easily recognized and practiced as censorship. As a result, it is easy to dismiss the state as not foundational to the making of the censorial. I argue instead that the act of (self-)censorship is embedded in and interactive with existing gender, religious, social, cultural, and political conventions and standards. In this regard, the state always figures into the censorship process as the creator, defender and benefiter of these standards.

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<sup>201</sup> Raiford Guins, *Edited Clean Version: Technology and Culture of Control*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 183.

<sup>202</sup> Guins, xvi-xviii.

This study discovers however that censorship is neither coherent nor entirely effective. Censorship does not always appear as coercive and brute force, but also discursive and ideological power. At the censor interface, relations, subjectivities and priorities are being negotiated, not just laws. Censorship calls into question the assumed nature and hierarchy of the relationship between the Thai state, television producers and spectators. Censorship of *lakorn* neither starts nor ends with an absolute decision by the Thai state to obligate a reconfiguration of spectator expectations. Rather, the censor interface serves as a space for individuals, interests groups, and fan communities to demand a reconfiguration of state tactics and involvement. Censorship as an apparatus of social control consists of multifarious “cultural practices that, while not necessarily directly expressive of policy or legislation, persist to structure an equally viable component of governance and mark an expansion in how governing functions through culture.”<sup>203</sup> The productive power of censorship can be located in the work that it does to connect popular culture and state control, making them mutually constitutive and interdependent. This study contends that the forces and outcomes of censorship are engendered by and in turn, engendering new structures of powers, configurations of social demands, and assemblies of viewers.

As May Adadol writes about cinema, the “embodied potency and communicability of film (in its cognitive, sensorial, and affective dimensions), combined with its technological capacity and historical conditions of exhibition, carry the potential to configure symbolic public spheres that recognize experiences ignored or rendered invisible in official spheres of exchange and representation.” Cinema within this framework serves as an alternative public sphere.<sup>204</sup> In contrast to the theater projection of film and even the limited screening of independent films or

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<sup>203</sup> Guins, xvii.

<sup>204</sup> May Adadol, “Introduction,” in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, ed. May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 8-9.

documentaries, the serial temporality of *lakorn* inherently produces different viewing practices in its audiences. Having to catch their soaps at the same time day in and day out, regular viewers are pushed to consume *lakorn* in a routine fashion and usually within private spaces. The conflation of the fictional and the real is habitualized and intensified in *lakorn* spectatorship. *Lakorn* does not serve as an alternative public sphere but as the public and private in one. Instead of creating an alternative public platform for off-screen experiences previously invisible or marginal, *lakorn* encourages the privatization and personalization of on-screen experiences that are highly accessible and mainstream.

As a result, it would be misleading to group *lakorn* censorship under film censorship even if both are mediums of visual representations. Whereas the new Cinema and Video Act authorizes film censorship *prior* to theatrical release, *lakorn* censorship does not operate in this mode. Who censors, how to censor, and when to censor are questions asked throughout *lakorn* production and broadcast. Due to its serial programming, it is not too late to censor a *lakorn* in the middle of its airing. Moreover, censorship is not a decision handed down by a board but an ongoing dialogue in which concessions, compromises, and collaborations are made. In other words, it is a negotiable process rather than a definitive judgment or protocol. While the mechanisms (sanctions for taboo topics, blurring images, muting sounds, running disclaimers, forced edits, and the ban) may be similar to film censorship, its temporality is not. I argue against examining only the final means of *lakorn* censorship since it misses the intangible forms, mediated character, dispersed timing and after effects of censorship.

### **Twin Vengeance**

Why should we watch *lakorn*? Apart from being thrilling and addictive, *lakorn* is powerful and productive. Its power lies in its capability to infiltrate many aspects of Thai modern life.



*Lakorn* consumption is an enriching experience wherein viewers “come to see themselves in relationship to the world.” *Lakorn* provides viewers with “pleasure and comfort in a world that, for many Thais, is increasingly fragmented, unpredictable, and insecure.” The *lakorn* plays an active role in alleviating, reflecting *and* producing these tensions.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, the *lakorn* is no longer merely an imaginary space to which viewers momentarily escape. The *lakorn* serves as a viable means to discuss real issues and real experiences. It is an interactive space where viewers can decipher, question, reconfigure, but also reaffirm the conventions of Thai gender politics, governmental politics and the politics of everyday life. *Raeng Ngao* (เรณูเณง – Ch.3, 2012) is the perfect example of how the multiple processes of world-making, identity-making, meaning-making, and claim-making are simultaneously at play through the *lakorn*.

When *Raeng Ngao* burst onto the scene, Thai audiences were once again captivated by the spectacle of backstabbing and catfights among the female characters. This drama was a remake of a popular story about vengeance, deception, forgiveness and of course, true love. Set in a Thai ministry office in Bangkok, *Raeng Ngao* first follows Mutta, a polite, gentle and diligent woman working under the head director, Pope. Even though married with three children, Pope is a serial adulterer who soon sets his sights on Mutta as the next target in his string of extramarital affairs. In his scheme to win her heart, he lies to Mutta that he is separated and will soon divorce his wife, Napa. Mutta falls for his fabrications and hopes to build a future with him. Mutta also grows close to the gentlemanly Weekit at work. Weekit, Pope’s blood nephew, is interested in Mutta as well but loses to his uncle’s practiced womanizing ways. When Napa hears news of Pope’s infidelity, she insults and attacks Mutta at the ministry for being gullible and sexually indiscriminate. Napa’s spiteful tantrum, characteristic of her narcissism and elitism, was recorded by other employees in

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<sup>205</sup> Sara Van Fleet, “Everyday Dramas; Television and Modern Thai Women” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1998), 5-6.

the office building to be publicized and disseminated online for all to see. The disgrace and indignity of being labeled a shameless mistress drives Mutta to commit suicide alongside her unborn child by Pope.<sup>206</sup> Within the first few episodes, viewers catch glimpses of the underlying moral messages of the *lakorn*: the need to preserve the sanctity of marriage, the importance of family, and the pitfalls of egotism. But the remake of this beloved story added some contemporary caveats by exploring the dangers of rumors and secrets in a defamatory culture, the decline of personal privacy and the destructive uses of modern technology.<sup>207</sup>

The tragedy of Mutta's death set the stage for the ruthless game of revenge enacted by none other than Mutta's older twin sister, Munin. The *lakorn* took a turn into the dark side with her highly anticipated appearance. Munin is a confident and capable woman who graduated with a Master's degree from New York University. She works to support her family at a major computer company in the U.S. Mutta's suicide taints her return to Thailand after years abroad. Before reporting to work at the Bangkok branch, Munin decides to exact coldblooded revenge on those who harmed Mutta by disguising herself as her younger twin sister and wreaking havoc on their lives. Munin's retaliation begins when she is confronted by Napa in the same staircase at the ministry where Mutta had previously faced humiliation. In this reprise scene, it is Munin, masquerading as Mutta, who slights Napa in front of crowd that gathered. This particular scene instantly became the talk of the town as online and media commentary relished the wicked grandeur of Munin's awaited vengeance. This familiar story of a resilient, independent and

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<sup>206</sup> "Lakorn Raeng Ngao [Drama Heated Shadow]," *THAIV3*, accessed March 1, 2014  
<<http://www.thaitv3.com/ละคร/192/แรงเงา.html#ad-image-0>>.

<sup>207</sup> For more on defamatory culture, see David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

educated woman settling the score gained great traction with domestic audiences. Throughout the course of its run in late 2012, *Raeng Ngao* raked in phenomenal ratings, peaking at 16.



Illustration 5.1: Left - Promotional poster for *Raeng Ngao* which stars Janie Tienphosuwan as Munin/Mutta, Pip Rawit Terdwong as Pope and Ken Phupoom Phongpanu as Weekit; Right – Munin’s first encounter with Napa disguised as her twin

Many Thai viewers participated in this kind of progressive reading of the character of Munin. Citing her assertiveness and aggressive as non-normative traits, they interpreted her as a role model figure. Surprisingly and perhaps inadequately informed by feminist discourses, these interpretations transformed Munin into a champion of women’s rights. Can an attractive corporate executive by day, devious vixen by night challenge Thai gender, social, cultural and moral norms? Driven by a strong resolve, Munin took it upon herself to enforce justice. She transcends the image of the meek, docile Thai woman espoused by her twin sister. At the same time, Munin seduces Pope by donning racy outfits and heavy make-up. She purposely taunts and provokes Napa about her husband’s infidelities. Munin’s revenge is achieved at the expense of their family. Oddly enough, she is at once a feminist and femme fatale. A *lakorn* character had become a challenger of Thai conventions of feminine beauty and female agency. Munin was the indicator and tester of changing perspectives on the role of modern Thai women.

Because of this, the state had to come in to demystify this bewildering and contradictory appraisal of the character. Complaints about the forceful tone and inappropriate content in *Raeng Ngao* were filed directly with the Ministry of Culture and NBTC, through social media, and on entertainment news since the start of its run. The NBTC had to force Channel 3 to assign an 18+ rating. When this action was not enough to calm the criticism, the NBTC had to call a meeting to initiate an open discussion on what to do about the rest of the *lakorn* set to air. In the end, the *lakorn* was able to complete its run after some scene edits and lines of dialogue voided of sound.<sup>208</sup> With mounting grievances, the NBTC was obliged to come in and conduct a thorough evaluation of *Raeng Ngao*, similar to the scenarios mentioned in Chapter 3. This incident illustrates how state bodies do not follow a set protocol for every case. This pattern suggests that censorship is still very much a state mediation of a diverse and divided multitude of voices. While state policing bodies may be the delegated enforcer of varying forms and degrees of external censorship, the censor interface allows for relations to be negotiated, demands to be uttered, and compromises to be reached.

### **Worlds Collide**

What could be real is in theory interpreted and presented in and as *lakorn*. But what happens when *lakorn* is interpreted as real? What happens when it becomes real? At the 4<sup>th</sup> Nataraja Awards on May 19, 2013, Tanyares Ramnarong won the award for best supporting actress in television for her portrayal of Napa in *Raeng Ngao*. In her acceptance speech, she thanked her husband Peck Sanchai Engtrakul. This gesture on stage was in no way meant as a token of marital bliss. Tanya thanked her husband for giving her the experience of being *mia luang* (head wife) to

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<sup>208</sup> “Wor Tor raai amnat sop nua haa Raeng Ngao song tor NBTC pijarana [The Ministry of Culture lacks the power to evaluate the content of Raeng Ngao and forwards the case to the NBTC for consideration],” *Kapook!*, accessed April 1, 2014 <<http://drama.kapook.com/view49736.html>>.

sufficiently relay the crazed emotions of Napa on screen. This got a sizable cheer from the audience in the theatre and probably at home who are well aware of her ongoing feud with Pinky Savika, her husband's *mia noi* (mistress).<sup>209</sup> Much like her character, Tanya was engaged in a bitter real-life quarrel with “the other woman” that included such ploys as secretly recording their phone conversations (read confrontations) and leaking private texts between Pinky and her husband to the tabloids. Her thank-you message was a veiled declaration of victory and a performance in itself. She was acting out her role as the legitimate wedded wife beyond the small screen. This merging of the world of *lakorn* and reality happened in the most “spectacular” of ways.



Illustration 5.2: Both Tanya (left) and Pinky (right) were nominated for best supporting actress at the 4<sup>th</sup> Nataraja Awards

Then, in the summer of 2013 while studying in Thailand, I was asked by my oblivious colleagues why the gossip around actress Janie Tienphosuwat, who played Mutta and Munin in *Raeng Ngao*, was suddenly on the front pages of the newspapers even as Thailand was still

<sup>209</sup> “‘Tanya’ phak khop khun ‘Pek’ thii tham hai in bot mia luang [Tanya thanks Pek for helping her get into the role of the head wife],” *Thairath*, May 20, 2013, accessed April 1, 2013 <<https://www.thairath.co.th/content/ent/345800>>. At the same award show, *Raeng Ngao* took home an award for best director, best cast and best supporting actor to ‘Pip’ Ravit Terdwong for his portrayal of Pope.

investigating a major religious scandal revolving around the dubious actions of a millionaire monk. It seemed at the time that an entertainment scandal rocked the Thai public more than the one that rattled the Thai *Sangha*. As the resident *lakorn* and Thai pop culture expert, I had to explain why this seemingly simple story of her marriage exploded in the press. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, Janie organized a press conference to announce her sudden marriage to Ae Chonsawat Asavahame, a high-profile politician. During their interview, the pair disclosed that they had gone to legally register their marriage at 9 a.m. that very morning. Apart from flaunting their rings and marriage certificate to the dozens of journalists present, the couple showed a copy of Janie's recent pregnancy examination proving that this was not a shotgun wedding but "true love."<sup>210</sup> Like a scene out of a *lakorn nam nao*, the whole press conference appeared so amusing, orchestrated, and sensational.

Indeed, this was no ordinary marriage. It was a riveting account of how the two worlds of *lakorn* and celebrity lives can collide. Ae happened to have a wife, country singer Nantida Kaewbuasai, and an 18-year-old daughter with her. However, he affirmed that their marriage was not legal and they have been living apart for 10 years. The tabloid press had been following his 5-month courtship of Janie, intermittently releasing leaked photos of the pair. Janie had previously denied a relationship with Ae.<sup>211</sup> With their romance on open display at the press conference, however, it was impossible to stop the comparisons between Janie and her *lakorn* character. Janie's alleged affair with Ae bore an uncanny resemblance to Munin's rendezvous with the married Pope. Amazingly, this carefully staged moment represents (real) life imitating (*lakorn*) art through (media) spectacle. More precisely, it was the blurring of the boundaries between real world and *lakorn* world, publicity and personal life and public discourse and private consumption.

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<sup>210</sup> "Aung! 'Ae' klaeng teang 'Janie' puey yaek kap 'Tu' 10 pii-mai keuy jot thabian [Quiet! 'Ae' announces his marriage to 'Janie' and reveals that he has split with 'Tu' and that in their 10 years together, he did not register the marriage]," *Thairath*, August 8, 2013, accessed April 1, 2014 <<http://www.thairath.co.th/content/ent/362260>>.

<sup>211</sup> "Wealthy political marries leading actress," *Bangkok Post*, August 8, 2013.



Illustration 5.3: Janie's press conference announcing her marriage to Ae (from *Kapook!*)

*Raeng Ngao* ushered in a new era of *lakorn* spectatorship in Thailand. The life of the *lakorn* does not end when it has finished airing. *Lakorn* can go on to encompass real life. Spectatorship extends beyond the home and beyond the “text” of *lakorn*. *Raeng Ngao* proves that Thai soap spectatorship does not avoid thinking too much about the *lakorn*, but is instead actively and seriously engaged in a close “reading” of the *lakorn*. In this reading of the *lakorn*, spectators generates new critical discourses (reevaluating gender norms), social relations (celebrity aiding gossip tabloids), creative interpretations (Munin as feminist) and fascinating reimaginings (real life mimicking *lakorn*). The world of *lakorn* offers us a glimpse into the many unexpected ways in which contemporary Thai society is reinventing itself. Rather than *lakorn* having to adjust to the bounds of censorship, the censor interface must now work hard to keep pace with the *lakorn*.

### **Conclusion: *Lakorn* Studies**

Television was introduced in 1999 to Bhutan, the only country left on earth that did not have access at the time. From that moment on, television has reached universal accessibility. Television both showcases and shapes contemporary life across the political, social and cultural

spectrum. But is TV true? Is TV beautiful? What can TV be?<sup>212</sup> The Frankfurt School in the 1930s developed a critical approach to communication studies which applied critical social theory to the study of mass-mediated culture and communications. These scholars recognized emerging “culture industries” (popular music, television, popular literature, magazines, radio soaps, and even horoscopes) as more than a form of leisure activity but as “important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, and productive institutions of contemporary societies.”<sup>213</sup> My study understands the *lakorn* as a viable and valuable medium through which to address and reflect upon social problems that are otherwise sidestepped. Everyday viewers can access the *lakorn* as a reference point for contemporary debates on issues such as constitutional rights, freedom of speech, religious authenticity, gender politics, political reform, national identity and morality. *Lakorn* therefore can be many things: entertainer, educator, advocate, instigator, investigator and troublemaker.

I participate in an emergent field called *lakorn* studies. My study of *lakorn* and the *lakorn* itself complicates the divide between reality and fiction, public and private, fan and critic, and prohibition and self-regulation. This project is also at an interface:

On one hand, studies of how ‘we’ (intellectuals) consume culture have worked on the assumption that readers actively make interpretations, drawing on a detailed set of already held knowledge about similar texts, previous great works and other forms of cultural capital...On the other hand, studies of how ‘they’ (the masses) consume culture have, for much of the century, assumed that these readers do not do any work interpreting the texts. Rather, in some way, they have ideas put straight into their brains.<sup>214</sup>

Nonetheless, Alan McKee reminds us that how work on fan audiences debunks the distinction between scholarly processes of interpretation and fannish ways of making meaning. We need to

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<sup>212</sup> John Hartley, “Television Truths: Argumentation of TV,” *Television Truths* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), 1, 9-10.

<sup>213</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Television and the Frankfurt School,” in *Television Studies*, ed, Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 17-18.

<sup>214</sup> Alan McKee, “Fandom,” in *Television Studies*, ed, Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 66-67.



note the ontological similarity between academics and fans because both “view” and engage with the television texts at hand.<sup>215</sup> Perhaps my position as both a researcher and fan of *lakorn* is a blessing in disguise. My venture into analyzing the censorship of the *lakorn* is to explore what stories can and cannot be told and why. Thus, this entire study is an interpretative story of a curated story. As a story of a story, it nevertheless was able to pose many questions, some left unanswered. But just as the Thai *lakorn* censor interface is plagued with ambivalence and contradiction, I too will embrace the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty because it is just more fun that way.

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<sup>215</sup> McKee, 69.

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